

CoNTiNεNTAL

D R i F T

This book is dedicated to Eugene Nelson.

You were the real thing, old friend.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THERE AT THE DAWN

I was there in the Spring of Love, the spring that preceded the Summer of Love. I was one of the first to settle in that decayed yet funky neighborhood which was to form the center of our universe over the next year or so. Our new home in which we would give birth to a whole new world constructed upon the rot of the old. A spiritual world. A psychedelic world destined to expand and expand until finally it had swallowed the entire ignorant, violent, materialistic world that lay outside.

That was how we saw it at the time, anyway.

And I'll never forget those first days of spring weather when I was able to set out and explore my new environs for the first time. Those days of hope and wonder and endless possibilities, though at the same time they were days of danger. Because that neighborhood was far from being ours at the time. Not when we were simply a few scattered freaks living within a sea of frequently hostile long-time residents. And whenever one of us ventured out into the streets that spring, it was to risk a confrontation with one group or another of those "Locals" as we called them, pronounced in such a way as to make it a pejorative term. Those descendants of the various ethnic groups which had long populated the neighborhood.

Those Locals who, while they may already have been on their way out long before our arrival, either from flight to the suburbs or from marriage and assimilation into mainstream white America, were still to be seen in significant numbers at the time. The last dregs of the old groups, in any case. Poor and uneducated and as shabby and pitiful as the neighborhood itself had become. While included among their ranks were groups of young men who would roam the streets in packs, adrift and directionless as they watched the world of their ancestors slowly crumble before their eyes. Watched and searched desperately for someone upon whom to place the blame for their plight, someone upon whom to vent their rage. And as we first of the hippies made our appearance upon the scene, we quickly became their favorite target. Often alone and completely vulnerable in those earliest days when there were still so few of us around.

Alone and vulnerable as I was myself on one early spring day when I had the misfortune of falling into the clutches of one of those young Local wolf-packs. One warm and sunny day when I made the mistake of going out by myself to walk the streets of my new urban home. Walking along innocently, a bit naively perhaps, until all at once I saw ahead of me several young Locals dressed in that outdated fifties-style which so many of them affected. Leather jackets and boots and greased-back hair. And as they made their approach, their posture was so clearly hostile and aggressive that I slowed down to glance about in search of an escape route. When I turned to look behind me, though, it was only to discover that there were several more young Locals who had been following me. And then no sooner had I come to a complete halt

than both groups came rushing up to surround me on all sides. To stand there threateningly as they began to talk among themselves while I struggled to contain my shock, my fast-rising panic.

They spoke, though rather than English, they did so in whatever language it was that their ancestors had brought with them from Europe, the name of the language being something that I can't tell you since to me all Locals looked and sounded alike. And whatever it was that they said, it was obvious from their tone and their body language that what they were discussing was my fate. Talking and gesticulating until finally after several minutes had gone by, one of them motioned with his hand for me to follow. To be drawn along at their center, more correctly stated, as no sooner had he waved than the whole group began to move down the street together. Taking me off to I knew not where since I hadn't heard a single word of English.

I went with them, of course. What other choice did I have? And I did so in as calm a manner as I could, with my head held high, knowing that the least sign of fear or hesitation on my part could unleash a devastating attack. I went along, the embodiment of self-assurance to all outward appearances, gazing serenely about me as though I hadn't a care in the world. As though I were among a group of old friends.

And where they led me was up one block and down two more and up another until we came to a place where a man sat upon the steps of a rundown tenement building. An older man with prison tattoos showing above his collar and below his sleeves, and one whom those younger Locals approached with a certain air of deference. Slowing their pace and calling out in some alien form of greeting as we drew near, pointing at their captive with pride. And then as the man smiled and returned the greeting, soon the whole group of them were rattling away in that unintelligible language of theirs. Older man and younger men, all of them speaking back and forth, back and forth for minutes, interminable minutes. Until suddenly the Local elder turned his head and spoke to me in English.

"What you doin' around here?" he asked me bluntly.

"I was just out walking," I replied, doing my best to hold my voice steady. To mask the terror within.

"Well, you walkin' in the wrong place!" he snorted.

"Perhaps," I conceded calmly.

"And you livin' around here?" he continued his interrogation.

"Not far."

"Oh, that's bad, man. This not a healthy place for you. Not a bit healthy."

"Perhaps," I conceded once again.

"No, this no good, man. Cause you can't go walkin' around here like you own the place. And you sure as hell can't live here," he went on in a voice that seemed to be losing some of its hostile edge. Impressed by my manly composure, it appeared.

I didn't answer him this time, though. I maintained a noble silence instead. And with my silence, he went back to that strange foreign language of theirs, speaking to the young men who had brought me there and to the others from the neighborhood who had gathered to watch the spectacle. He spoke to them for some time, making occasional gestures toward me and answering any of the others who spoke up, his voice calm and reasonable despite the anger, the passion of the others. Calm and reasonable as though he were trying to calm the waters, it sounded to me, perhaps even taking my side.

And when he finally broke things off, turned to address me in English once again, he did so in a tone of apology, even regret. "I'm sorry, man. You seem like you're an okay guy, but we can't have none-a you hippies comin' around here. So we gotta make you an example." Adding after a pause a heartfelt, "Sorry."

No sooner had the elder finished speaking than the young Locals who had originally captured me began to close in from all sides, some with ardor and some with hesitation, many of them holding sticks and other weapons in their hands. They closed in while I stood with my head as high as ever, still hiding the fear within even as the moment of truth drew near. Playing my bluff to the bitter end as I watched those greasy-haired goons come ever closer. With eagerness in the eyes of some, especially so in the case of the one who approached me face-to-face. Because he was anxious, he was ready to go. But then just as he raised his club to strike, suddenly a pretty young girl came rushing out of the crowd and jumped between us. Stood facing that young Local in a defiant pose as she yelled out to him and to everyone else in English, "If you wanta hit him, you gotta hit me first."

The young Local's arm froze in place as he glanced back at his leader for guidance. That tattooed elder who shouted some foreign phrase at the girl only for her to respond with an emphatic, "No!" The elder yelled at her again and then again, in English as well as their own language. He ordered her and pleaded with her, though still she refused to obey. And she spoke her defiance more than once during the course of the argument, shouting at full volume. "No! It's both of us or it's nobody."

With such determination in her voice that soon the others began to waver. The elder who finally made a gesture as though to indicate that he was washing his hands of the whole affair, while even the most aggressive of the young Locals seemed to pull back from the edge. Even they stepped aside to let us pass when the girl grabbed me by the hand and led me away. Led me out of that circle of doom. Out of that hostile neighborhood and out of that entire world of danger. Led me back to my own street instead, my own little world of peace and love and harmony and understanding.

Where the two of us were to live happily ever after, of course.

PART I

PERCEPTION

That instant in which the sense organs make contact with the physical world.

ENTER GABRIEL

Gabriel knew that he was finally in the right place at the right time as the Spring of Love came into bloom. He was finally at the right age. He wasn't too young to catch the movement in its glory days as he had been with the Beat scene, and he wasn't too old, either. Not too old to become one of the movement's elders, in any case. One of its leaders. Not too old to fulfill his destiny at last and to achieve the greatness to which he always knew that he had been born.

Because Gabriel could sense it from an early age. He could tell that he was going to "make it" someday. And he was sure that the people around him must have sensed it as well, whether they expressed their admiration for him openly or whether they tried to deny it. Whether they acted like his mother who never tired of telling him how fantastic he was, how handsome and intelligent and creative, or whether they acted like the kids at school. At all the different schools he attended in towns and cities all over the country, his mother always being on the move as she was, bouncing from place to place and boyfriend to boyfriend. Because each time that he entered a new school, the kids were sure to take notice of him, sure to see immediately that he was different. Superior. And as his mother explained it to him again and again, new school after new school, it was the awareness of their own inferiority that caused all those boys to bully him as mercilessly as they did. Masking their envy while doing their best to hold him down to their own mediocre level. As for the girls, they kept falling in love with him one after another. He could tell from the looks in their eyes. He could sense their reactions even before he was old enough to care.

And so given all that evidence, all that praise whether open and direct or whether twisted and disguised, it was obvious from the beginning that Gabriel was special. That he was destined for great things. Though as he grew older, it slowly dawned upon him that the one thing missing from his formula for success was a vehicle to carry him off to the world of fame and fortune. An arena in which to achieve a stardom that didn't involve either athletic or musical talent since he possessed neither of those. And it wasn't until he was almost at the end of his high school career, until he read a recently-published book by a man named Jack Kerouac, that ever he found what he had been looking for. Because from the moment he started to read that book, it hit him like a revelation. As though what he was reading had been written especially for him, especially for Gabriel, a guy born to beatness if ever a person was. Seeing himself so clearly on page after page as he read, seeing himself as one of the characters in the book or perhaps as all of them put together, that he couldn't get enough of it. That life, that world. That book which he read over and over again, along with every other "Beat" book he could find. Read those books and re-read them and read them again until they fell to pieces, and even then he continued to read them.

Dreaming all the while as he read, dreaming of the day when he would finally be able to go out and make his own splash in the world. His Beat debut. That day which was to arrive at last shortly after he left home to begin what would prove to be an off-and-on college career, an off-and-on life as well since he turned out to be no better than what his mother had been when it came to staying in one place. That day when shortly after his move to the city where his first college was located, he set out to explore the local coffeehouses—or rather the coffeehouse. Visions of counter-cultural glory filling his head as he stepped through the door for the first time, though visions which were soon to come crashing to the ground as he discovered there a scene which bore almost no semblance to the one described by Kerouac and his friends. A scene in a serious state of decline, with beatniks and other phonies having long since displaced the Beats about whom he had read. A scene of pose and put-on, he quickly concluded, one of appearances rather than substance. And then as though all that weren't bad enough, what he also found was a scene in which his own qualifications seemed to go completely unacknowledged. His own soul-deep hipness. Because everyone he met that day acted as though he were nothing but another kid, another wannabe. As shallow and artificial as they were themselves.

So Gabriel cursed his luck at being born too late. Far too late to have caught the scene in its glory-days, back when Jack and Neal and the rest of them were tearing up the highways and tearing apart all forms of conventionality and squareness. And in his disgust he rejected the whole thing. That poor imitation, that caricature almost of the scene which he had been expecting to find. He rejected it that day in that coffeehouse, and he rejected it in all the other cities he was to pass through in the coming years, city after city, coffeehouse after coffeehouse. He rejected those tepid scenes and the hollow people he met there, rejected them just as they kept rejecting him. All the men anyway. Because while those men may have refused to recognize him for what he was, the women were attracted to him as irresistibly as ever. He could tell even when they gave no overt sign. Even when they pretended to ignore him, went so far as to reject his advances. He could tell because he could see it in their eyes.

And if only there had been something more authentic available, none of those coffeehouses would have seen his face again. Not one of them, Gabriel swore to himself as he spent those lost days, those lost years hanging around that ever more decadent scene. The only *real* Beat in a sea of poseurs. He would have been gone in an instant had there only been some third option. Something besides the square, conventional world toward which his life seemed to be evolving, slowly yet irresistibly. The life of a job, or rather a series of jobs, and a life at complete odds with what was inside him. His dreams, his destiny. Though given the poverty of the only counter-culture available at the time, what other choice did he have?

And it was only when he saw the brand-new hippie scene make its appearance in the world that he knew that his moment of glory had arrived at last. Because he could feel it in his bones, in his guts, his heart. The knowledge that his opportunity was finally here. The chance not only to catch the wave at its very beginning but also to help shape that wave in some way. To guide it and perhaps even supply it with some of its most vital substance. And he was sure that he had all the credentials needed to become a leader of that infant scene. A local leader in any case, a leader in the East Coast city where he soon went to live and spread the word. Because it was in that city that he was going to create a whole new scene from scratch, he vowed to himself. He who had the experience of the Beat movement behind him, and he who had actually spent

time in San Francisco the year before during that city's Summer of Love. He who had already been a part of it even before most of the world knew of its existence.

He who had been there at the climax, in fact, as he had taken part in the Great Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park. The event, the Happening of a few months earlier which in so many ways had proven to be the great transformative moment of the hippie movement. The day on which that movement had revealed itself to the rest of the world. Ceased to be a local San Francisco thing as instead it had burst upon the consciousness of the entire world, or at least upon the consciousness of the entire country.

Because that January Be-In in San Francisco was the event which would forever mark the beginning of the Summer of Love for the nation as a whole, mark that beginning just as surely as it marked the end of the Summer of Love in San Francisco. With hippies suddenly starting to spring up everywhere, it seemed. Appearing as if by magic and flocking to San Francisco in such numbers as to drive that scene into the ground and destroy it even before the next summer had properly begun. Though at the same time those hordes of new hippies were also creating their own scenes in cities and towns all across the country, even in a few foreign cities. Giving birth to Summers of Love in western cities and midwestern cities and eastern cities such as the one where Gabriel...

Oh, it had been something, that Great Human Be-In! To have been a part of it, to have lived it and breathed it and... Why he had actually rubbed shoulders with some of his greatest heroes. Ginsburg, Snyder. And in fact, he'd even had a chance to talk to Gary Snyder for a few minutes. Talk to him as equals, as one Beat to another. Or should I say as one hippie to another. And after an experience like that, of course he had been floating for days. Weeks.

With his head lost so far in the clouds that he had hardly been aware of his surroundings. Hardly aware even of the workings of his own mind until suddenly one day when a vision seemed to spring to life of its own accord, fully formed. A vision of that East Coast city which he knew so well, and especially a vision of one particular neighborhood. The perfect place, Gabriel had told himself as he thought about the plan which had somehow sprung to life along with the vision. Perfect for what he intended to do there in the coming months.

It was a city in which he had spent a great deal of time over the years, constantly coming back for some reason or other. And whenever he had walked the streets during those long years of waiting, he had always been struck by the potential that some of its old ethnic neighborhoods seemed to hold. Especially the neighborhood just outside the so-called old harbor. Because it was a neighborhood that practically begged for a counter-cultural scene, and it was hard for Gabriel to believe that the place could actually have no bohemian tradition whatsoever. None that he was aware of, in any case. Not a single coffeehouse. Not one.

Instead it was a simple working-class neighborhood, full of rundown houses and tenements, full of shuttered stores and the occasional greasy spoon or dark little bar, one edge of which abutted the broken-down fences meant to keep people away from the half-collapsed docks of that now derelict section of the city's port. Too small and decrepit for modern ships, and not yet renewed and converted into the tourist zone that it would one day become. While thanks to the urban flight which the neighborhood had suffered over the last decade or two, with the

working-class ethnics moving out to the suburbs at an ever-increasing rate, the place was full of recently abandoned housing, cheap but habitable. The exact sort of neighborhood to which artists and other dropouts have always been attracted. The exact sort of place in which to create a whole new scene from scratch, Gabriel the would-be founding father had told himself.

Because what he was going to do when he got there was to open a business destined to become the center, the focal-point of a nascent local scene. A coffeehouse to be situated right in the heart of that old waterfront neighborhood. Though it wasn't going to be just any old coffeehouse, he had gone on to himself as the image in his head grew more distinct with the passing days. No, it was going to be unlike anything that the world had seen before. A place that would take the best of the past and shove it headlong into the future. Modern and traditional and psychedelic all at the same time, and completely original in its gestalt, completely his own. That was how it appeared in his head anyway.

And it was with that vision before his eyes that Gabriel had soon made his return to the East Coast. Gone to the bank where he had taken out all his savings and borrowed what he could, used the money to rent a building and begin outfitting it. Luckily for him, it hadn't take long to find exactly what he was looking for, a building that was centrally located, sitting as it did on the main intersection of what was sure to become the hippie district. And on top of that the place was fairly large, big yet still intimate thanks to the booths and alcoves lining some of the walls, while best of all it had a certain rundown charm to it. The exact look of faded gentility which Gabriel had been hoping to achieve. And so thanks to all that good fortune, his own work in preparing the new establishment had proven to be minimal. Cleaning up and preparing the kitchen in back while adding the various details and decorations which he felt that the place needed in order to give it just the right bohemian air. Small, discrete touches of psychedelia scattered here and there, along with one big, monster touch designed to blow everyone's minds. A mural, a giant mural covering most of the rear wall. A mural that was "modern" and abstract and colorful and psychedelic, though at the same time it was a mural whose quality and subject matter fell within his own rather limited range since, for budgetary reasons, he had been forced to paint the thing himself.

When the time came to furnish his coffeehouse, Gabriel had gone out and bought a lot of secondhand tables and chairs, with hardly any two of them alike so as to give the place an air of randomness and spontaneity. He hoped. And then as a final touch, he had installed a small stage in one corner, a place for poets and perhaps the occasional musician.

So it had been fairly easy for him to set it all up, easier and less expensive than what he had feared. And when he stopped to think back about the whole process now, it seemed like he had spent more time trying to come up with a good name for the coffeehouse than anything else. Because he had wanted to name it something catchy and original. Something that would pay homage to the people who had inspired him perhaps, and especially to the ones he had met back on the day of the great event. Especially to Gary Snyder. And so he had tried and tried, going through every name he could think of that made some reference to Snyder's work or even to the portrayal of him that appeared in Kerouac's book. Ryder's Nirvana or Ryder's Something-or-Other. He had tried the obvious, and he had tried the obscure in his efforts to come up with a clever and imaginative name, though in the end he had failed. He had been unable to think up anything usable. So that finally he had been forced to fall back upon the least clever and most

direct of all the references to the great event which he had considered. He had been forced to settle for naming his coffeehouse The Great Coffee Bean-In, soon to be shortened to The Bean-In.

Not a great name, Gabriel knew, though still it portended no ill-success, he assured himself as the day of the grand opening arrived. The day on which he was to open the doors of The Bean-In and reveal his vision to the world for the first time. That part of the vision which he had managed to translate into a concrete reality. Still it did nothing to diminish his sense of anticipation, his sense of impending triumph.

And in fact, he was so brimming with optimism as the big day dawned that no sooner did he get out of bed and take a look out the window than he just had to say it to himself, "Ah, Buddha is smiling on me." Had to say it out loud. Because what he saw when he looked out the window that morning was a clear blue sky. A warm, sunny day. The first warm day of the year so far. And as he gazed upon it, he knew that what he was seeing was the day which, no matter what the calendar may have had to say, was in fact the first day of spring. The first day of the Spring of Love.

And Gabriel's spirits were every bit as bright and sunny as the day itself when he arrived at The Bean-In and went about the final preparations for the opening. Practically trembling with excitement as he raised the shades and unlatched the door, and as he hung out the Open sign. And then when he stopped for a moment to survey his handiwork, he was pleased with himself. He was very pleased. Because while the place may not have measured up to his vision in every way, still it was more than good enough. The best that anyone could have done given the resources available. And it would surely be good enough to propel him right up to some sort of local counter-cultural summit. The Mayor of Hippieville. The King of Freak Street. Oh, he could just feel it coming. And as he glanced over at the stage in the corner, he could almost hear the poetry, all the great poetry that was going to be presented there over the coming months and years. By others and perhaps by himself as well since one of these days he might just get up there and recite.

Or did I say recite? No, that's not what Gabriel was going to do with his poetry, but instead he was going to create. Right there on the spot. Because to him, poetry was a living thing. It was something that came to life in the moment and then faded away just as quickly. It wasn't something that you wrote down and saved, and it certainly wasn't something that you read back later. And so given that attitude of his toward poetry, none of his work was on paper, of course. Nothing to prove to the world that he was a poet. Nothing to... Prove? What did he have to prove? he asked himself quickly in response. He who was a living poet, his life his poetry. And if some of his less-generous acquaintances may have inferred that the real reason he never wrote anything down was because his poetry wasn't very good and because it would have been quickly rejected by publishers, that was nothing but their own bad karma that was speaking. Their own ignorance. And the problem with those people was that they just didn't get it. They didn't understand the spontaneity of his poetry, his life, his entire way of being.

Because it was spontaneity that Gabriel loved more than anything else. It was living in the moment. And in fact, it was the very spontaneity of the hippie movement that he found so attractive right then. It was the freshness of the whole thing. The wide-open, undefined aspect of

the movement in those days when the Summer of Love was just at its beginning, the stereotypes yet to set in. Or at least they had yet to take over completely, as instead there still existed a certain attitude of create-your-own-hippie among many of them, an attitude of every-person-their-own-hippie. And if Gabriel's version of a hippie owed a lot to the Beats whom he had so long admired, then so be it. It was still a valid version in those days, as valid as the whole flowers-and-incense stereotype which the media was so diligently promoting.

It had to be valid, Gabriel was sure that it was. Because he had been there and seen the movement at its moment of birth. He had seen how some of the Beats had played major roles in the Great Human Be-In, and that's not to mention the political activists like Jerry Rubin who had also played leading roles. And then what about the Hell's Angels? Weren't there some of them who hung out with the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury? So did that make them hippies? You may say no, but if not, then what were they? And what exactly was a hippie right then? In those days when the whole thing was still so new and so fluid. So up in the air.

But enough reverie, Gabriel told himself. Enough thinking about the bigger questions. Because at that moment he had a coffeehouse to run, a place to open up and welcome the world. The hip world, anyway. And as he ran back over the preparations in his mind, he hoped that everything was ready.

Not that it was going to be a very difficult place to run, not when all they would be offering was coffee and a very simple menu. Sandwiches and salads mostly. But still with this being his first business ever, he didn't know what to expect, what exactly might go wrong. And more than anything else he had nagging doubts about Mandy, the hippie girl he had hired to wait on tables while he hung out by the cash-register. Asking himself, Would she measure up? Mandy or Mandalay as she had given her full name on the day she came in to apply for the job. Because while her looks had immediately impressed Gabriel, the long brown hair and the slender body and the spacey-blue eyes, he had begun to wonder about her almost from the first moment she opened her mouth. Started to talk about the history behind her name in a rambling discourse that seemed to wander everywhere. From a dream about going to visit the city of that name someday, perhaps going to live there, all the way to visions of Buddhist temples and Burmese pythons and flying fish. A reference to that corny old song, evidently. And she had gone on in that way for so long a time, talked about so many different things, obscure things most of them, brought up in such a random, disjointed stream-of-consciousness, that when she had fallen silent at last, she had left him scratching his head. Wondering what the hell it had all been about, though wondering at the same time just how good she might be in bed. What she would be like if he could just get her to shut that beautiful mouth of hers for a little while and get down to business.

Whatever was to happen, though, he hoped that she would stick with it. Because if she didn't, he could find himself in serious trouble, she being the only hippie he had been able to find so far who was willing to work for him. The only person there, other than himself, who was capable of giving the place the proper atmosphere. Or in other words, she was his only "presentable" employee, unlike the two girls—women really—he had hired to work in the kitchen. Those girls who came from one or another of the ethnic groups that had long inhabited the neighborhood, which group exactly being something that he didn't know and didn't care to know since to him, they were all simply Locals as he referred to them disparagingly. Because while the girls may have been far more presentable than most of the young Local guys he had

seen—those refugees from the fifties with their leather jackets and their greasy pompadours—still they didn't fit in with the image that he was trying to present. And he knew that even if he were to dress them up as hippies, there was something about them that wouldn't quite click, something that wouldn't feel right. So that all he could do was to hope against hope that nothing would happen to Mandy, or better yet hope that some other hippie would respond to the help wanted sign which he had posted. Someone to back her up and someone to cover for her on her days off. Someone besides Gabriel himself.

The foot traffic outside the coffeehouse began to pick up soon after he opened the door, with nearly all the passers-by being Locals of various ages and sizes. And as they passed, The Bean-In seemed to hold a special fascination for many of them, stopping to stare at the door and the sign with psychedelic lettering that hung above it. Some of them creeping up to peer through the windows, while a few of the braver ones even stepped through the door briefly to take a look around. But none of them ever sat down or ordered anything, seeing immediately that this new establishment wasn't their type of place.

And it seemed like the place had been open for quite some time before finally the first group of freaks came by, long hair and love beads. A group which proved to be just as attracted by the sign outside as what the Locals had been repulsed by it, coming straight inside and sitting down at one of the tables. Gabriel's first customers ever. They had a look of disappointment on their faces as they glanced about the room, however, and it wasn't until Gabriel and Mandy came over to greet them that ever the look began to disappear. Smiles, polite smiles as they chatted and looked through the hand-drawn menus. Bigger smiles all the time as Mandy blabbed away. And then as they placed their orders at last, as Mandy said goodbye for now and headed for the kitchen, as the group settled in and began to talk among themselves, Gabriel moved off a few steps where he pretended to be busy while doing his best to listen in. To "accidentally" overhear their small-talk and their chatter and their occasional comments about the interior design of his establishment. Their less-than-kind assessment, it turned out to be. Because as he listened, it soon became clear that they didn't care for the look of the place at all, not measuring up to the pictures they carried around inside about how a hippie place was supposed to look. Too plain and simple, he could hear them say. While the moment they got around to the subject of that mural he had painted, their comments suddenly became especially unkind. Asking, What's that thing supposed to be anyway? Something psychedelic? Or is it just plain weird?

A second and third group of freaks came along some time later, beards and sandals and granny dresses. All the freaks passing that way, it seemed, since The Bean-In was as yet the only "destination" for them in that neighborhood. It was the only place worth visiting. And the one thing that they all seemed to share as they came inside was that initial look of letdown on their faces. Especially so in the case of the younger freaks. Though it became ever less of an issue as The Bean-In began to fill with people since once the crowd reached a certain critical mass, the new arrivals tended to focus more upon the other customers—the other freaks—than they did upon the decorations and the mural.

Among those coming in there were a few that Gabriel recognized, people he had known casually during his intermittent periods of residence in town. And no sooner would he see one of them enter than he would go right over and give them an effusive greeting as though they were dear old friends, shaking their hands or patting them on the shoulders, even hugging one or two.

He would go over to play out his new role and play it to the hilt. His role as gracious host to an entire community.

An infant community which seemed to be growing at some exponential rate given the number of freaks who kept appearing throughout the day, with more and more of them showing up to replace the early-comers as they left. And to be growing from what? To have sprung up from nowhere? Because Gabriel couldn't remember ever having seen a single freak walking the streets before that day. Not until now when all of a sudden, here they were. Everywhere. Having gone from zero—or from two, Gabriel and Mandy—to a hundred. Over a hundred. And they had done so in a single day!

It was amazing. Gabriel could hardly believe what he was seeing. And as he watched the community grow and grow before his eyes, he looked on in the way that any proud parent would have done. He looked at his community, the one that he was creating from nothing. The one that he and his coffeehouse were creating.

And he was still in the full glow of victory that afternoon when something about one of his new customers caught his attention, some strange vibe. The customer in question was a young kid, big and tall and gangly, while from the way he was dressed, it was hard for Gabriel to place him. Because he wasn't a Local, that was for sure, though at the same time he wasn't dressed like a freak either. He had slightly shaggy hair perhaps, but his shirt and jeans were as plain and simple as they come. And then as Gabriel began to look the kid over more closely in a furtive sort of way, he soon came to realize that it wasn't the outfit that was drawing his eye. Not when there had been other customers earlier who had come in looking something like that without ever having caught his attention. So no, there was something else about this kid, something familiar. And it wasn't until the kid's eyes fixed upon Gabriel and he came walking over, it wasn't until then that finally the mystery was revealed. "Hi there, Uncle Gabriel," he called out with a big smile on his face.

"Oh, hi there..." Gabriel hesitated for a moment, not wanting to call the kid by the awkward name of Nephew. Finally finishing the sentence with the word, "Cousin." Because even now as he recognized the kid, still he was completely unable to recall his name. And in fact, he didn't even know how they were related exactly. Not with the way that family of his was so full of divorces and remarriages and out-of-wedlock births. Not with the complexity of his family tree. So was the kid a nephew or a cousin or something else? He didn't know. All he knew was that he was related to the kid's father in some way or other, though that hardly made them uncle and nephew. And as he pondered the question, the only thing he could say for sure about their relationship was that the kid was his step-something-in-law.

"So, uh..." Gabriel began, feeling that as host it was up to him to continue the conversation. But the problem was that he had no idea what to ask about the family, remembering nothing about that branch beyond a vague recollection of the father. And at the same time he didn't feel comfortable about broaching the question of what had brought the kid there. Not when it could so easily lead to a discussion about the family. So that in the end he decided to turn the conversation toward a subject with which he felt more comfortable. He decided to turn it toward himself. "So what do you think about my place?"

“Oh, it’s great,” the kid came back with what sounded like genuine enthusiasm. “It’s even better than what Dad said it would be like in his letter.”

Dad? Letter? Gabriel thought it best to ignore those comments and instead to push on with his discussion of himself. To ignore them in the same way that the kid seemed to have ignored being called Cousin. “Yeah, it was a lot of work putting it all together. Finding just the right place and then setting up everything just right. Giving the place the right type of atmosphere. It wasn’t easy.” Here he paused to glance about with a look of pride on his face. And the only time that his expression darkened was when his gaze fell upon what he now realized was a disaster of a mural.

Gabriel soon went on, though, talking for some time about himself and his coffeehouse and anything else that he could think of, and it was only as he prepared to break away and go elsewhere that he was finally faced with the necessity of asking something about the kid and his situation. Because he couldn’t just walk away like that, could he? He had to show some sort of interest in his cousin’s life. Though he had to do so in as noncommittal a way as possible. “So you’re here, uh...”

“I’m here on a ship,” the kid finished the sentence for him.

“A ship?”

“Yeah, it’s tied up right over there,” the youngster said, pointing in the direction of the old abandoned docks.

“Over there? But they don’t...” Gabriel didn’t know how to respond to that piece of news.

“Oh, we’re not workin’ cargo or nothin’ like that. The ship’s just laid-up over there is all.”

“Laid-up?”

“Yeah, we’re waitin’ for a cargo... Goin’ to Nam,” the kid added in that tone used by green young kids when trying to sound like veterans, and it wasn’t long before he began to expand upon his story. “They say it’s gonna be a few weeks before the cargo is ready, maybe even a month or somethin’, so they laid the ship up at one-a them old docks over there and they laid everybody off. And they say they’re gonna break it back out as soon as the cargo’s ready... It’s an old Victory Ship sittin’ over there,” he threw out as though an afterthought.

“And so you’re gonna...” Gabriel was about to ask if he was going home, though realizing that he still had no idea where that home might be, he finally asked, “You’re gonna wait around here for it?”

“Yeah,” came the kid’s monosyllabic reply. Until evidently sensing his uncle’s sudden stiffening in anticipation of a request for a place to stay, he soon went on to allay the older man’s fears. “And I can sleep on the ship while I’m here. I got it all set up with the guards that way,

where they let me go on board whenever I want to. So I can sleep there in the dark cause there's no power or nothin'. But I don't mind that."

"No, of course not. You're still young," Gabriel responded with relief in his voice. "So this is what? Is it your first ship?"

"Uh huh," the kid said with a hint of reticence, as though not wishing to reveal the fact that not only was it his first ship but also his first time away from home, most likely. And when he spoke again a moment later, it was on a new and different tack. "We just got back from the Med."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, we was takin' stuff to all them bases over there. Turkey and Spain and Italy..."

"It sounds like fun."

"Oh man, it sure was..." the kid began with growing enthusiasm, apparently getting ready to launch into a sea story in that phony imitation of salty grammar which he had been using ever since he got started talking about ships and the sea.

A story which Gabriel was in no mood to listen to, however, as he quickly moved to cut the kid off before he could get started. "Well, enjoy yourself here," he said with an air of finality. "I've got work to do right now, so I'll talk to you later, okay?" And then without waiting for a reply, he turned and went back about his business as host and cashier. And he ignored the kid in all good conscience after that, having already done his part and shown the interest required of him by the rules of propriety.

Barely looking in the kid's direction again. Or at least not until he began to notice the way that Mandy was acting around him, the open come-ons she kept tossing at that big, good-looking kid and the way she would go over to talk to him every chance she got. Because it was only then that his attention was ever drawn back to that oversized cousin of his. Back to that kid whose responses in kind seemed to stir up something deep inside. To offend Gabriel in some basic, fundamental sort of way. As though the whole thing violated his sense of... of decency, of justice. His sense of... of... of proprietorship!

And so the next time that Mandy disappeared into the kitchen, Gabriel walked over to say something to him. To ask, "So how do you like my girl?" in a tone implying a relationship that didn't actually exist. In a tone that asked the kid at the same time, What the hell are you trying to pull?

"Your girl? Oh, I'm sorry Uncle Gabriel," the kid stumbled all over himself in reply. "I didn't know. I wouldn't..."

"Yeah well..." Wow! Gabriel said to himself, surprised at the success of his little ruse. So resounding that it was almost enough to make him feel ashamed of himself for having manipulated that poor, dumb kid in the way that he just had. Almost but not quite. Because after all, he was the boss around there, wasn't he? So if anyone was going to get first shot at Mandy, it

was him. It wasn't going to be some kid off the street or off a ship. It was going to be him. Gabriel. The owner and proprietor of The Bean-In. He was the one who was going to get into Mandy's pants first. And the same thing went with the two girls who worked in the kitchen, or at least with the better looking of the two. She was reserved for the boss as well. She was his, or she would be if he could just find some way to break down those old-world inhibitions of hers about sex. Some way to turn her into the fine piece of ass that he was sure she could be.

Gabriel was soon accepting the kid's apology with all the grace that could be expected from an offended lover. Telling him not to worry about it, no harm done. And then when he saw the kid's reaction upon Mandy's return, when he saw how her first flirtatious look was met with stone-cold rejection, once again he was saying, Wow, to himself. This kid is really gullible. So gullible that there must be some way to... you know, some way to turn this thing to my own advantage. Some way to use that kid for... Or not use him exactly, cause that's not the hip thing to do, but some way to... you know.

And it was only as the kid got up to leave, as he came over to the cash-register where his uncle was standing, that suddenly a plan came popping into Gabriel's head almost like an inspiration. "Hey, would you like a job? Would you like to work here?" Because while the kid may not have been a freak exactly, he was young and malleable, and he seemed to have interacted well enough with the freaks who had joined him at his table. Not to mention the way Mandy had reacted to him early on. So that maybe he would be the right person to end the manpower shortage around that coffeehouse.

Maybe, had he not responded with a, "Gee thanks, Uncle Gabriel, but I don't need the money. I got plenty."

"Oh, you do?" Gabriel's hopes seemed to come crashing down all at once, though it was only for them to revive an instant later as another thought struck him. An even better plan, brought to the fore all at once by some old instinct of his, it must have been. An instinct from an earlier existence when he had worked as a salesman. "So do you, uh..." he tried to find some delicate way to put it. "Do you... Are you looking for a place to invest it?"

"Invest it?" The kid sounded lost.

"Yeah you know, to make a profit out of it and all that."

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Cause like you could... you could..." Unable to think of any other way to say it, finally Gabriel just came right out with it. "You could invest it in this place for instance."

"Here?" The kid's voice sounded totally confused now. "But it's not like... I mean, I don't have all that much."

"No? How much?"

"Oh, it's just like... It's just the payoff from the trip I made. The part I didn't send to the bank back home," the kid began. And then seeing the look of disappointment that came over his

uncle's face, he soon added. "But if ya need it, I could loan ya a little. Like a couple hundred or somethin'."

"Yeah...?" Gabriel's latest inspiration seemed to be dying still-born.

"And I could work for ya, too, if ya want me to," the kid went on as though doing his best to regain his uncle's approval. "Like I don't need the money, but I could do it as a favor."

"Right, a favor..." Gabriel muttered. But then as he began to digest the significance of what the kid had just said, suddenly his enthusiasm was back on the rise. "Yeah sure, that'd be great. I could use ya," he said. "I sure could. I could... Like how about tomorrow? Can you be here tomorrow first thing?"

"Yeah tomorrow, no problem. I'll be here." And with that, the kid was soon gone.

The kid but not the plan. Because as Gabriel thought about the situation now, with the kid coming back as a volunteer rather than an employee or an investor—as someone who didn't have to be paid—it seemed that if anything the possibilities had just expanded. The possibilities of what he could get that kid to do for him. Not only covering for Mandy on her days off, but there was also a whole range of other favors that he could ask of... of... whatever his name was. That kid whose name he was bound to recall sooner or later.

THE RIVALS

As wonderful as the grand opening of The Bean-In may have been, it was only a matter of days before the first dark clouds began to appear on Gabriel's horizon, with rivals popping up in the neighborhood. Two rivals to be specific. Two very different rivals.

The first rival that Gabriel noticed was a brand new hippie establishment a couple of blocks away. A restaurant of some type, it appeared to be. One with psychedelic painting all over the outside and with a sign announcing its name as the Hash House. Not a very original name, he thought, and not a very original looking place either. Not like what his own place was. Because instead that new place looked just like all the stereotypes that were slowly but steadily taking over the hippie movement. It looked like it must have been copied from photographs of the Haight or something like that. All of it so standard-issue.

And nothing to pose any real threat to his own establishment, he quickly concluded as he thought a bit more, because instead it would simply serve as one more option for the freaks who were showing up in that neighborhood in greater numbers every day. Just that and nothing more. Just another place for the ever-expanding community to eat or to hangout. And so had it not been for the gnawing doubts which he felt down inside each time that the thought came up, the curiosity which seemed to grow with each passing hour, he never would have sent his young cousin over there to find out what he could about the new place. Sent the kid over to serve as a spy of sorts since Gabriel had no intention of going there himself, so that instead it was up to that cousin of his... that... That cousin whose name he still couldn't remember no matter how hard he tried. That kid whose name just...

Had he really used that many drugs over the years?

The second rival to appear upon the scene in those days was a far more dangerous one as far as Gabriel was concerned. Dangerous and all too familiar since the establishment in question was run by a long-time antagonist of his, a guy with whom he had butted heads years before when he had lived and worked in that town. Because there was something about that guy!

Dick Jacobs was his name, and he had once worked with Gabriel. Worked at the same lot back in the days when Gabriel's life had fallen to its lowest ebb ever. When in the long downward spiral of his last-lonely-Beat days he had once sunk as low as a person can possibly go. Sunk to the lowest depths of existential despair, though it was only to sink even lower when he had gone out and gotten himself a job as a used-car salesman. A job selling lemons to suckers. And then as he had spent those drab and dreary days hanging around the lot, wallowing all the while in a sea of misery and self-loathing, he had constantly found himself at odds with that asshole Jacobs.

Because somehow it seemed like everything about the guy had gotten onto his nerves. Everything he said and everything he did, just as everything that Gabriel said seemed to have gotten onto Jacobs' nerves as well. With a repugnance so overpowering and so clearly mutual that there had existed a state of continuous warfare between the two of them during the entire time that they worked together. An abhorrence so deep and so all-encompassing as to have spilled over into every other aspect of their lives.

Though maybe it hadn't been all that bad at the beginning now that Gabriel stopped to think about it. Maybe it had even been a friendly rivalry at some early point. A rivalry over women, of course. What else? Because he and Jacobs had been the two best looking guys working in the lot, so that the question had immediately arisen between them about who was going to be the number one stud. Who was going to get the girls? Either the good-looking single women who came in as customers or the ones in the bar where the salesmen used to hang out in the evenings. Who was it going to be? And did anyone bother to keep score? If they had, Gabriel was sure that he would have had it all over Jacobs since he knew that he had always gotten the best ones, the top choices, while Jacobs had been stuck with the leftovers. And it seemed to him now in retrospect that it must have been Jacobs' jealousy at his opponent's carnal success which had led to all the later problems. Jacobs' inability to accept his status as number two. That's what must have started it all, and it must have been only later on that it had spilled over into all those other areas. Attitudes and lifestyles and beliefs.

All those occasions during the last months of their rivalry when Jacobs had come out and declared his hatred of everything that had to do with the Beats and poetry and non-conformism of any sort. When he had called Kerouac names and insulted others of Gabriel's heroes in a series of attacks which, as Gabriel thought back, seemed to have started on the very day that Jacobs first learned about his bohemian past. A series of attacks which had clearly been aimed at him personally despite their third-person content. And whether that hatred of all things counter-culture had remained personal or whether it had grown into something pathological, Gabriel couldn't say. He wasn't a psychiatrist. All he knew was that by the time he left the job, Jacobs had come to hate everything that he loved. Absolutely everything.

And to discover now that the asshole was right here in Gabriel's neighborhood! Right here where he could sow the seeds of dissent against the vision that Gabriel was trying so hard to create. Because he knew exactly what lay in store. He knew it from the first moment he saw Jacobs opening the door of what looked like a bar one morning soon after the discovery of his other rival. A bar which lay a short distance beyond the Hash House and one which Gabriel had never noticed until that day when suddenly he saw Jacobs for the first time in years. And while he couldn't say how long the bar had been there, it was obvious from the looks of the place that it couldn't have been very long. Not long enough for its owner or his patrons to have caused any trouble. Not yet. Though knowing what Gabriel knew about Jacobs' character, the future outlook was bleak. Very bleak.

It was late in the afternoon of that earlier day when his young cousin returned to The Bean-In with his report on the first of the new rivals, the Hash House. And the moment Gabriel saw the gleam in the kid's eyes as he came through the door, he knew that he should brace himself for the worst. Brace himself for a glowing review, which was exactly what he got.

"Oh, it's really neat!" the kid gushed enthusiastically. "It's like the neatest place ever."

Neat!? Had he actually just said that it was neat? Had he actually used that long outdated expression to describe it?

"And it has these cool designs all over the place. Like real hippie-lookin' stuff. And the people there are really... They're like really cool!"

Cool? Now he was calling everything cool? What was wrong with that kid's vocabulary? Why did he keep using those old expressions instead of saying something modern like far-out or outa-sight? Why was he so uncool?

"They're like the coolest people ever. And they're like... Their place is like... It's cool. It's really cool," the kid brought his inarticulate ramble to an end.

"And so... What is it? Is it a restaurant?"

"Yeah, I guess ya could say that, but it's not exactly like a... I mean it's not like a normal-type restaurant."

"No...?" Gabriel had no idea what the kid was driving at.

"No, cause like for one thing, it's all free."

"Free!!?" Gabriel could hardly believe his ears when he heard that word. Had the kid actually said it? Had he said that it was free? He had to be kidding, didn't he?

"Yeah, like all of it's free, and they just ask ya if you'll donate somethin' after ya eat. Like to give em whatever ya think is fair or whatever ya can afford."

"Free?" Gabriel still found it impossible to digest that word. "That sounds like a helluva business model," he went on, his disdain for his competitors showing in his voice. "Free..." He

shook his head in disbelief. He, the leading businessman of that brand new community. He with three whole days of business experience under his belt. He couldn't believe that anyone could be so naïve and inexperienced as to try running a place on a model like that. Because it was stupid. It was ridiculous... Before long, though, another thought interrupted his reverie, a more practical consideration. "So how's their coffee?" he asked

"Coffee...? I don't think they have any over there. They like... They have all these teas and stuff. All these herbal teas. But I didn't see anyone drinkin' coffee."

"No coffee, huh? Just tea... Tea and it's free. It sounds like a great place," he said facetiously.

"Well, they say all that free stuff is cause-a this group they're with. The Diggers I think they called it. They say that's how they do things. The Diggers..."

The Diggers!? Had that kid actually said that the people over at the Hash House were with the Diggers? The San Francisco Diggers? That they claimed to be tied in with that group? Gabriel couldn't believe it, and he hardly knew what to say. Because the Diggers? If there was any way to claim real, true Haight-Ashbury legitimacy for yourself, it was by saying that you were with the Diggers since they were the ones who ran the whole Hashbury if anyone did. They were the ones who kept it going, the Diggers with their Free Store and their Free Food in the Panhandle each day. They were the closest thing there was to hippie royalty. And so for those people over there at the Hash House to claim that they were Diggers...

Well Gabriel didn't buy it. Not for one minute he didn't. Not from that bunch over there, whoever they were. Because there was no way that they could be the real thing. Not like what he was. He who had been there and lived it. He who had been a part of it. There was no way that they could have been there too. Not them. Not that bunch.

ATTACK AND COUNTER-ATTACK

Whenever a new group of people moves into a neighborhood, there always develop frictions between them and the longer-term residents. That's something that goes without saying. But when the influx of people comes at such a prodigious rate as it did in the case of the hippies in that old waterfront neighborhood, with the population doubling and tripling in mere days, it was almost inevitable that those frictions would soon lead to sparks and perhaps even full-fledged flames. What else could one have expected given the huge disparities in attitude and outlook which existed between the two groups, between those who were coming there in search of a Summer of Love and those who sought only to preserve their neighborhood in the way that it had always been? And so it wasn't long before their conflicting attitudes led to a series of confrontations that threatened to convert the Spring of Love into a spring of violence.

Confrontations which first began with small, barely noticeable affronts: dirty looks and whispered insults and mumbled threats. Incidents so fleeting that they barely pierced Gabriel's consciousness at all, which was perhaps why he was taken by such complete surprise on the day when the real troubles began.

It happened one afternoon early in the second week of The Bean-In's existence, on a day that seemed just like every other day that spring so far, warm and sunny and pleasant, and with ever-growing crowds of freaks filling the neighborhood streets. So many of them by that time that they nearly outnumbered the Locals. Nearly but not quite. Not for a few more days yet. And if you were to discount all the little problems and minor provocations which had preceded it, you could say that the trouble that day came about as the result of a conspiracy, a plot hatched by a group of long-time residents.

A plot in whose first stage a number of young Local males, gang members with slicked-back hair, made their appearance on the streets near The Bean-In. Two of them at first, followed shortly by another and then another, then two more. And as they came, they did so as quietly and inconspicuously as they could, each individual or pair keeping to themselves rather than forming into one of the wolf-packs in which they normally moved. But while they seemed to be making every effort not to call attention to themselves, their numbers alone should have been enough to raise an alarm in any alert observer, especially given the signs of nervousness that all of them exhibited to one extent or another. The signs of expectation and the way that many of them acted as though they had something hidden beneath the coats—mostly leather jackets—which they wore in spite of the warmth of the day. Those things should have given them away but didn't thanks to the fact that all the freaks out on the street that day were apparently either too stoned to notice what was going on or else they were too much the innocents from suburbia. Or both. And so the Locals' plan was able to move ahead unimpeded.

They slowly filtered into the neighborhood until there were a dozen of them, more than a dozen, spread up and down the street near The Bean-In. Silently stationing themselves at strategic intervals where they shuffled about uneasily while awaiting the signal. Watching and waiting for one of them—their leader and chief conspirator—to wave his arm and give a yell.

"Let's do it!" as suddenly all hell broke loose. Suddenly all the love went out of that Spring of Love. Locals pulling weapons from their coats: clubs and chains and even a tire-iron. Swinging them wildly as they attacked every freak in sight.

Freaks quickly scattered in every direction, some of the initial victims getting away with nothing but glancing blows while others went down. Went down hard as the Locals continued to kick and beat them mercilessly. Beat them until the blood flowed. And as those who had been caught out in the middle of the street tried to make their escape, the Locals did their best to box them in and surround them while slowly moving in for the kill. Respecting no one in the process, beating the girls as well as the guys, while a few of them yelled out, "Hippies go home!"

What the hell!? one part of Gabriel asked another part of Gabriel as the screams and shouts reached his ears. As he moved toward the nearest window to see what was going on, though it was only to freeze at the sight. To stop and stare and ask himself, What the hell? again and again. Were those things that he was seeing outside the window real? Or was it all a hallucination? Was he just imagining the screams and the clubs flying and the people running? Was it possible that a slaughter like that could actually be taking place?

There were other people inside The Bean-In who reacted in far more demonstrative ways than Gabriel, though. Customers who jumped up and yelled, "What's going on?" and, "Do

something!” while Mandy rushed over to the front door. Sweet, spacey Mandy who began to yell at the Locals outside while making obscene gestures. “Stop that shit! You fuckin’ assholes! Get the fuck outa here!!”

But even more than Mandy, it was Gabriel’s cousin who rose to the occasion during that crisis. It was he who leaped into action, he who went charging out the front door and straight at the nearest Local. Running right at the guy who apparently didn’t see him coming. Jumping on and wrenching the club from the guy’s hand before raising that evil thing above his head, threatening the guy with it until finally he ran away. An instant later the big kid was tossing the club aside and reaching down for the freak that the guy had just been beating on, dragging the victim inside The Bean-In where he handed him over to a couple of the customers who came forward to help. And then no sooner was the injured man safely inside than the kid was running right back out the door, running out to rescue another freak, followed shortly by another, as meanwhile with each trip that he made out and back, more of the customers kept rallying to the cause. More of them kept stepping up to treat the injured while others went over to help Mandy blockade the front door. And the only thing that none of them was ever brave enough to do was to follow the kid outside. Out into the melee.

All of them reacted in one way or another, though. All of them but Gabriel who continued to stare in disbelief at the events as they unfolded. Standing and watching and doing nothing. The one part asking the other part if this was just an acid reflash or what. A bad trip that would work itself out if he just sat back and let it happen. And it wasn’t until the moment when he saw a young Local kid come running up toward the window through which he stared that finally his mind—if not his body—began to react. The moment when he saw how the kid was carrying a big rock in his hand, running up to break the window.

Hey, stop!! Gabriel wanted to yell. Don’t do it! Don’t break that window! He wanted to yell but couldn’t, the words lost in the maze before reaching his mouth. Do you have any idea how much it costs to replace a window that size? So don’t do it!!

And his muscles only sprang into action when suddenly the glass before him shattered into a million pieces that flew across the floor and peppered his legs and shoes. Because all at once his body seemed to know exactly what it was that it had to do. Knew that it had to go out there and get that Local kid before he could break any more windows.

Had to send Gabriel rushing toward the door in an angry blur, barely aware of what he was doing as he shoved Mandy and the others aside before starting out into the street after that little vandal. Running at him while yelling, “Get the hell outa here!” and, “Come back here, you!” in turn. “Get the hell outa here!” as suddenly the kid looked back and saw him coming, turned again and took off like a shot. So young and so fast that he quickly left the older man in the dust. “Come back here, you!” as Gabriel was soon forced to give up the chase.

Forced to stop and look around, though it was only to say, Oh shit! as he suddenly became aware of where it was that his legs had carried him. Right out into the middle of it all! Into that street where several of the Locals were still hard at work beating on whatever victims they could find. And he was out there alone, all alone. Unarmed and helpless.

Or at least he was alone until that cousin of his came charging up to join him. That big kid who ran over and then stood beside him, shoulder-to-shoulder, while staring down the last of the diehard Locals. And as the kid began to advance upon the nearest of those grease-and-leather thugs, Gabriel felt himself being drawn along almost against his will. One step after another, going straight at the guy with fists clenched and heads high, getting so close and moving so aggressively that soon the man was forced to back down and flee the scene, followed moments later by his remaining friends. All of them. The last of the Locals turning and running off behind, so that in the end the only people left standing in that entire street of carnage were Gabriel and his cousin. Just the two of them. Alone and erect. Unscathed. Victorious!

It was only a matter of seconds after the flight of the Locals that suddenly freaks began to pour into the street from all sides. They came to help the injured or to greet their two heroes. Their two saviors. They came from The Bean-In, and they came from the other hippie establishments which had sprung up along that fast-developing row over the last week or so. They came from the recycled-record shop which had just opened its doors that morning, and they came from the head shop, and they came from the offices of the soon-to-be-published underground newspaper. They came and they cheered those two guys who had taken on the Locals face-to-face. They sang the praises of their heroes, and they surged forward to pat them on the backs.

Who me? Gabriel couldn't help but wonder, still in a daze as he watched in amazement all the adulation that was suddenly being directed his way. What did I do? he asked with a look of bemusement upon his face which the crowd apparently took for humility, modesty, as they cheered him all the more.

It didn't take long before the accolades from the crowd began to change, however. To be replaced by interrogations as first one person and then another started to ask out loud, "What now? What do we do now?" They asked it of each other, and they especially asked those questions of the two men of the hour. Their two leaders in that moment of crisis. They asked the questions and asked them again. And since that big cousin of his reacted to the queries by transforming from the man of action he had been moments before back into a stumbling, tongue-tied teenager who looked toward his uncle for advice, Gabriel soon realized that all eyes were being directed at him. That everyone was waiting for him to speak and provide them with his counsel. His leadership. That they were all waiting for him to tell them what to do next.

"Well, uh..." Gabriel began. With no idea what to say. Because while he felt like he should be barking out orders like some type of hippie Errol Flynn, he couldn't think of what to say in those orders. Like should he say, Go out there and get that kid who broke my window? No, that wasn't what the people were waiting to hear, and it wasn't what Errol Flynn would have said either. And so he hemmed and hawed and tried to think, until finally he blurted out the first sensible thing that came into his head. "We've gotta take care of these injured people. That's what we've gotta do. We've gotta get em to the hospital." Something that was already being taken care of even before he had spoken.

"And we oughta call the police," he added a short time later, just as the first squad cars were making their appearance. After that he went back to hemming and hawing, drawing nothing but blanks in his search for a plan of action. And by the time he finally spoke up clearly once

again, asking, “Did anyone recognize any of em? Like say that kid who broke the window? Have you ever seen him before?” he looked about only to find that no one was listening anymore. That his following had been reduced to little more than his cousin and those last few stragglers who had yet to think of some other, more interesting place to go.

Or in other words Gabriel found that within a matter of the last few minutes, his standing within the freak community had gone from leader and idol and swashbuckling hero all the way down to nothing. Down to indecisive, inarticulate nobody.

In the immediate aftermath of what soon came to be known locally as The Massacre, Gabriel felt a tremendous suspicion of every Local he saw, whether young or old, and if any of them seemed to pause for a moment too long on the sidewalk near his establishment, he would step out into the street to watch them and make them hurry along. And he especially kept his eyes out for that kid who had broken his window, the face burned into his memory. Though when it came to taking any actual precautions, doing anything to prevent a repetition of the events of that day, that was something he never quite got around to, as instead he slowly fell back into the same old patterns of distraction and carelessness which had made the surprise attack possible in the first place. No insights gained and no lessons learned so that before long everything was back to “normal.”

But while Gabriel may have learned nothing from the episode, the people who ran the Hash House reacted to it in a completely different way. They took the lessons of that day to heart instead. Learned them all too well, if anything.

Because the fact of the matter is that the people at the Hash House were different from Gabriel in just about every way imaginable. Like for instance, none of them had the least qualms about visiting the competition, so that within a matter of days after their opening, all of them had found the time to stop by The Bean-In and pay a courtesy call. Dave and Mickey and Nina and others whose names Gabriel couldn’t recall. All the members of what they claimed to be a collective ownership of the place.

As Gabriel had met them one after another, he had classified them dismissively as a bunch of stereotypical hippies. A bunch of those flowers-and-incense types, he had said to himself, while at the same time the meetings had served only to reinforce his doubts about their having any sort of connection with the Diggers. And he knew that if he could just find some graceful way to broach the subject and quiz one of them about it, his suspicions would surely have been confirmed. Because how could they possibly be Diggers? That bunch of flower-power wimps. Any of them but Dave, that is. Dave who was apparently their leader. Dave who, while he may have had the stereotypical look and the stereotypical manner of speech, also had something about him that didn’t quite fit. Some air, some look in the eye. It was the look of an activist, it seemed to Gabriel. The look of a community builder perhaps. A leader. Or at least that was the impression which Gabriel took away with him from their first meeting. An impression which would return to haunt him later on, whenever he felt the most pessimistic about his own claims to such a status.

And what Dave and his friends did in response to that so-called massacre was not only to increase their own vigilance but also to increase their intelligence-gathering operations. Those

operations in which they had a huge head-start over Gabriel right from the beginning since rather than lumping everyone together under the pejorative term of Locals, they had quickly learned to distinguish one group from another. The Irish gang from the Italians from the Magyars and the Poles. And then as they began to apply themselves even more assiduously to learning everything they could about those various communities in the days following The Massacre, they were soon able to identify the leaders of every single ethnic group to be found in that and nearby neighborhoods. The community elders and the leaders of the youth gangs, learning not only their names but also the addresses where each leader lived.

And so when an incident occurred near the Hash House a few days later, they were ready to react. Ready to overreact, in fact, since the incident itself was something that probably would have passed unnoticed had it not been for the way that memories of the attack outside The Bean-In dominated the minds of so many of them. Because given their heightened sensibilities, any attack upon one freak became an attack upon all of them, and it didn't matter that the freak who was attacked that day was one of the most disreputable members of their community and one who probably deserved exactly what he got. That was of no importance to them as instead the only thing that mattered was the fact that a freak had been beaten up in the vicinity of the Hash House. A freak whose beating couldn't be allowed to go unpunished, Dave and the others loudly declared as they leaped into action. As they set out to teach the Locals a lesson that they would never forget. And if they ended up going a bit too far, then so be it.

The only real problem they faced that day came from the fact that despite all their intelligence-gathering capabilities, they didn't know the exact identities of the attackers. They didn't know who it had been, though they had very strong suspicions as to the perpetrators' ethnicity. And so it was based upon those suspicions that they quickly chose their target, the person against whom to direct their campaign of counter-harassment.

With Dave and the others out in the street within minutes of receiving word of the attack, yelling and preaching and rallying the hippie community. Rallying everyone in sight. And it wasn't long before they had a whole gang of people revved up and ready to go, marching along noisily, singing and chanting and playing kazoos. They had forty or fifty people, maybe more, marching down the street in the direction of the tenement building where the leader of the suspected gang lived. Filing inside once they reached the building and occupying the lobby and the hallways as their leaders declared a sit-in, and as the next thing that anyone knew they were all sitting down as near the door to the gang-leader's apartment as they could get. Sitting and talking and singing. Having a party in those hallways while blocking the passage of the building's residents and making so much noise as to keep anyone from sleeping. And during the whole time that their sit-in lasted, they sat without fear, confident in their numbers while knowing that the target of their harassment wouldn't dare to call the police on them and wouldn't allow anyone else to do so either, so that instead the party which began on that day was allowed to go on and on undisturbed. On for a night and a day and another night, with people coming and going in shifts. Swearing all the while that they wouldn't leave until the target of their campaign had agreed to get out of town.

Gabriel had nothing to do with any of it, of course. It wasn't his type of happening, he said. It was all too well-planned and orchestrated. It wasn't spontaneous enough for him. Besides which it was being led by his chief rivals who stood only to gain from his participation. But

while he may never have set foot inside the building during the sit-in, he was kept well-informed of everything that happened there thanks to that cousin of his. Thanks to that big kid who always seemed to be right in the middle of whatever was going on, marching down the street with the others and crowding into the hallway and staying there. Because he was always there when things were happening, and he was always ready to tell his uncle all about it whenever he returned for a visit. Holding nothing back as he would give out every detail, tell about everything he had seen, everything he had heard.

And Gabriel was especially filled with questions for his cousin on the day when the campaign was finally called off. That day when shortly after the last of the hippies had vacated the building, the place suddenly and mysteriously caught fire and burned to the ground. Completely destroyed while some of the residents barely managed to escape with their lives. And so the first thing that Gabriel wanted to know was who exactly had done it, of course. Who had set that building on fire? When he asked the question of his cousin, though, all he got in reply was a blank look.

“Who set it?” the kid responded. And from the tone of his voice, it became clear to Gabriel that the very idea of someone having set it had never occurred to him. The idea that it could have been anything other than an accident.

“Yeah, the fire. Who set it?”

“I don’t know. It couldn’t... It wasn’t...”

“No?” Gabriel asked insinuatingly.

“No, it’s just... It was karma, that’s all it was,” the kid finally managed to say.

“Karma!?”

“Yeah, it was bad karma. That’s what it was,” the kid continued. Adding after a brief pause, “That’s what they all say.”

“Who? Who says that?”

“All them people over there. They say it happened cause-a all the bad karma that guy had built up. They say it’s like...”

“Like his punishment for all that bad karma?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s his punishment.”

“Ri-i-ight...” Gabriel responded knowingly. Bad karma and a few matches in the hands of someone who doesn’t like you, that’s all it takes. And he almost laughed in the kid’s face, that dumb, innocent, gullible kid. Because was there anything that you couldn’t convince him to believe? Anything at all?

Even the Fire Department seemed to buy that explanation to some extent, however, as their investigation into the fire failed to lead them to any solid conclusions about its cause. They weren't able to say if it had been accidental or intentional since no accelerants were used. They could only say that it had started in a trashcan downstairs and then spread from there, but when it came to the question of who or what had first lit that trashcan on fire, they had no answer to give. They didn't know if it had been a cigarette tossed there carelessly by one of the residents or if it had been a match tossed there on purpose. And then even if it had been a match, they couldn't say if the intention had been to burn the place down or simply to smoke the people out. To scare them with a small fire which had somehow gotten out of hand.

And so in the end, no one was ever punished for the blaze. No one was held responsible. Not the hippies and not the Local gang-leader who in any case disappeared shortly afterwards, never to be seen in that neighborhood again.

The sit-in campaign—and subsequent fire—had a chilling effect upon the entire Local community, as can well be imagined, though it was hardly the definitive blow which its organizers had evidently hoped that it would be. Because instead there were more incidents in the days and weeks that followed. Sporadic incidents that seemed to come out of nowhere. Acts of vandalism and beatings of isolated freaks. Acts which generally went unpunished since their perpetrators were so seldom recognized, though on those occasions when a specific ethnic group could be identified, the reaction was sure to be swift and ruthless. So ruthless that it soon reached the point where the mere threat of a sit-in was enough to get the leader of the offending gang evicted by his neighbors. Evicted from his apartment and from the entire neighborhood.

But even with that, still there were Locals who persisted in their attacks, Locals who continued to fight on against all odds. And as the Hash House crowd fought back just as obsessively, questioning anyone and everyone they could find in their search for information about the various assailants, they found over time that a pattern was beginning to emerge. A pattern which may not have applied in every attack or every case of vandalism perhaps, though it applied in enough of them to where they were finally able to locate the number one trouble-spot in the neighborhood. Because in case after case, they found that the vandals or the muggers had been seen leaving the bar owned by that guy Jacobs shortly before the incident took place. That they had been in the bar receiving their orders from Jacobs or at least receiving encouragement from him, alcohol and the encouragement to go out and attack the first freak they came across. And so given that information, it didn't take long for Dave and the others to reach the conclusion that if they ever wanted to have peace and safety in that neighborhood of theirs, they were going to have to do something about Jacobs' bar. They were going to have to shut the place down once and for all.

Because after everything that they had accomplished in cleaning up the neighborhood so far, after the way they had gotten rid of the most incorrigible of the gang-leaders and broken up their gangs through sit-ins—and through that fortuitous fire—and after the way they had managed to convert so many of the younger Locals and turn them from potential enemies into hippies in their own right, there should have been peace in that old waterfront neighborhood already. Should have been but wasn't thanks to Jacobs and his bar, that one last place where the hardcore element among the Locals could still go for sustenance and support. And so it was with an air of grim determination that the group at the Hash House swore to themselves as the

troubles dragged on that there was no way they were going to let that single fly-in-the-ointment ruin everything that they had worked so hard to achieve. No way!

FINAL SOLUTION

Jacobs' bar without which there would have been no more conflict in that spring of conflict, they were sure of that. Nothing to prevent it from evolving into the Summer of Love which all the hippies knew that it was destined to become. So that if only they could find some way to shut the place down and remove its owner from the scene, there would be nothing to prevent their fast-growing community from achieving the ideals of peace and love and harmony to which it aspired. Nothing to prevent a real, lasting peace from descending upon that entire neighborhood. And then as the most observant among them soon began to remark, it was becoming more evident with each passing day that it wasn't just the hippies who wanted to see the closure of that headquarters of Local resistance, but that in fact there were growing numbers within the Local community itself who wanted to see it gone as well. Older members of that community who longed for an end to those days of trouble and violence.

Or in other words, it seemed that everyone was rooting against Jacobs and his bar. Everyone doing so for his or her own reason, whether it be Gabriel with his longstanding personal animosity or whether it be the community-builders at the Hash House. And in addition, there was another group which had recently made its appearance upon the scene and which stood to gain in a far more concrete way from Jacobs' eviction. It was a group which was allied with the Hash House crowd in some sort of way, even including Dave and some of the others in its leadership, apparently. And the reason that this new group wanted to get rid of Jacobs had to do with the location of his bar. It had to do with the fact that, as luck would have it, Jacobs' bar sat at a spot which held the very key to their entire vision of a hippie community. A spot where his continued presence prevented them from creating the one big thing that their community still lacked. Its heart, its soul.

Because the building where Jacobs had taken out his lease and opened his bar was in fact the entryway to a much larger building, a sort of lobby for a big old dancehall that lay just behind it. The Starry Night. And as those friends of the Hash House crowd had searched the neighborhood for a place in which to create their own local version of the Fillmore Auditorium or the Avalon Ballroom, they had quickly discovered that the Starry Night was the only suitable place in the entire neighborhood. It was the only building big enough for the concerts which they hoped to put on, while at the same time it was the only empty dance hall or auditorium in the whole city that was in good enough condition to meet the standards necessary for them to get the permits they would need, making it the perfect place. Perfect in every way were it not for the presence of Jacobs' bar blocking their access, their lobby. And since they had immediately found upon trying to discuss the matter with him that there was no way Jacobs would ever go along with them and get out of the way, no way he would let them put on the shows that they wanted to put on, they had soon come to the conclusion that they would have to get rid of him. Legally or illegally, morally or immorally. It didn't matter how. They would have to remove him since he was the one sore spot preventing them from turning that old waterfront neighborhood into the

vibrant, dynamic hippie community that all of them envisioned. A community with a living, throbbing musical heart.

It wasn't long after their arrival at that conclusion that the Hash House crowd and the Starry Night gang declared the beginning of a campaign of harassment against Jacobs' bar, with picketing and singing and even intermittent sit-ins on the sidewalk out front. Though unlike with their earlier campaigns, in this case they made a concerted effort to avoid any reference to fire. They lit no candles and sang no songs about fire since they didn't want to contribute to the sort of karma that might lead to the accidental burning of a building which they hoped to capture intact. That was how they explained their reticence about the use of the word fire to Gabriel's cousin and the other innocents, in any case. Though as it turned out, without the backing of that implied threat, their campaign did little more than sputter along for a couple of days with no apparent impact. Treated as a mere curiosity by Jacobs and his patrons. Until all at once, after two days of ineffectual picketing, the whole thing was suddenly called off by the leaders. Called off without explanation.

The followers within the crowd were left scratching their heads and wondering what was going on, while as for the leaders, they began to hunker down among themselves, evidently trying to digest some new bit of information which they had just received through their intelligence-gathering operations. Something which must have changed the entire complexion of the problem with which they were dealing, according to the rumors. And so they spent hours meeting together, hours engaged in hot and heavy discussion, until finally after two days, two nights of plotting and planning, a decision was made and a course of action laid out. A final solution to the Jacobs problem, the whispers around the neighborhood contended, and a solution which apparently began with a visit by a group of them to Gabriel and his establishment.

With three of them, Dave and two other men, appearing unannounced at the door of The Bean-In the next day during a quiet time when there were few customers to be seen. Walking inside much to the surprise of Gabriel who sat at a table near the back at the time, and who immediately began to ask himself how he should react. Whether he should go over and play the gracious host or whether he should stay where he was, playing hard-to-get. The hippest man in town so that if they wanted to talk, it was up to them to make the first move.

His cousin seemed to have no doubts, however, as the big kid went straight over to greet them as they came in, to greet all three of them including the one that Gabriel had never seen before. And he was soon joined by Mandy who rushed over the moment she caught sight of them, a smile for all and a big hug for Dave

For that outsider! That intruder! Coming in there to steal *his* girl. *His* waitress. Gabriel's juices were boiling at the very sight. Urging him to... to... To go over there and pull those two apart. To tell that guy to keep his grubby hands off. Urging him to...

"Hello, it's good to see you again," Dave smiled and held out his hand as Gabriel drew near.

As Mandy released her grip and stepped back, safely out of the man's arms, while Gabriel halted all at once in confusion. Stared blankly at the proffered hand as he asked himself how exactly he had gotten there. Asked what he should do now and what he should say and...

"You already know..." Dave went on in face of the befuddled silence that greeted him, indicating one of the men with him as he spoke. A guy whose name Gabriel had failed to catch back on the day they first met, not very friendly then and not very friendly now as once again the name eluded him, spoken too quickly for him to make out.

Dave was far more deliberate when it came to the second man with him, though, introducing him as Hugh something-or-other. A man who looked like what Gabriel would call a mature freak. Even more mature than what he was himself. And Hugh seemed to have a distinct air of authority about him as well, an authority which was quickly confirmed when Dave went on over the next minute or so to describe him as the main force behind the effort to take over the Starry Night and turn it into a concert hall.

With the introductions out of the way, the group of them were soon on their way to a big booth as Dave suggested, still the one in command despite Gabriel's gradual recovery of his verbal faculties. They were on their way, all of them including Gabriel's cousin and Mandy, the only one not to take a seat as instead she stood beside the table smiling sweetly at one and all, even at that sourpuss nameless guy.

"Well, uh..." Dave began hesitantly, glancing at his two companions as though for support. At the two self-invited guests with an air of suspicion, and finally at Gabriel as he struggled to go on. "We, uh... I take it you've heard about our plans for the Starry Night, haven't you?" he spit something out at last.

"Yes, of course," Gabriel replied tentatively, unsure where this might be leading. "I've heard a few things..."

"So tell me, whatta you think about, uh..." Dave began to stumble once again as his eyes shot over in the direction of the kid.

Of Mandy who seized the invitation to speak, whether intended or not. "Oh, it's great! Don't change the name. Cause stars, man. Starlight and stardust and... Wow! ya know. Cause like ya know how it all shines and sparkles and twinkles when the music hits it, and it's like... it's everywhere, man. Everywhere. Like on your clothes and your hair and it's in the air and you're breathing it in and you're... Oh man, what a trip! What a high. Cause like next thing ya know you're floating right up offa the ground, ya know. Right up into the air, and you're looking down at all the people there, and you're..."

"Thank you!! Thank you for that!" Hugh cut in all at once in a stern voice. Enough already! as he stared her into silence before nodding at Dave to go on.

"Yes well, what we wanted to know is what you think about our, uh... About our plans to... you know."

What do I think? What do I...? Aha! said Gabriel to himself. So they've finally come to the old master for advice, huh? The veteran, the Beat savant.

"Well, as I've always said," he began in an earnest tone as he set out to share some of his hard-won wisdom. He who may have known little about running concert halls or anything of the sort, his expertise in coffeehouses alone, though he knew a great deal about a lot of other things. About beatness and hipness and poetry and spontaneity and life in general. All those things which he had been so longing to expound upon ever since his arrival in town, had someone only bothered to ask him before. Had they only given him a chance such as this.

A chance to regale his guests with anecdotes from his early days, with some of those pithy phrases and pungent observations which he had been saving up for so long a time. A chance to rattle on and on, for minute after minute, unconscious of the glazed look which steadily came over Dave's eyes as he spoke. Unconscious of the way in which the other two visitors shifted about uncomfortably in their seats, the nameless guy shooting looks at Dave as though urging him to intervene while Hugh looked on ever more impatiently as well. Because instead it was only his cousin's rapt attention that registered with Gabriel as he spoke, Mandy's attempts to break in which he moved to quash each time by raising his volume. It was only those things which played into his own thoughts, his soaring emotions as he reveled in his moment of glory. Here at last. It was only...

"So whatta you think we should do about that Jacobs guy?" Dave suddenly blurted out as though he could take it no more, cutting Gabriel off in mid-sentence.

"Jacobs...?" Gabriel was knocked off-stride by the sound of that name coming so unexpectedly, so out-of-the-blue. His mind too far from that place at the time, too deeply absorbed in those other, more pleasant...

"Yeah, like how can we shut that guy down?" Dave went on in a forceful tone. Whatever reticence he may have felt about speaking in front of those unwanted witnesses gone, it appeared. Evaporated in face of the sheer boring brutality of what he had just been forced to suffer through.

"Shut him down...?" Gabriel tried to focus his thoughts. Tried to think about Jacobs and that bar of his, and to put aside all those bad memories of past encounters which kept popping into his head. Tried to recall instead some of the plans which had been floating around ever since the first day he spotted that bar. Those plans to... to... "Well you know that he serves minors in that place of his, don't you?" Something came to him at last.

Minors? The only reaction was a look of puzzlement on the faces of Dave and the others.

"Cause we could turn him in for it, you know. We could get him busted."

"Yeah...?" Dave began unenthusiastically.

Only to be interrupted by the nameless member of his entourage. "That's no good," the guy practically shouted. "All that'll do is get him a fine or something."

“Yeah, but we could keep on doing it,” Gabriel responded meekly, his doubts about the plan rising quickly in face of such an open attack.

And an attack which wasn’t over yet, either. “Keep doing it till when? Till a year from now? Two years when they finally get around to evicting him?”

“Well, I don’t know...”

As Gabriel fell silent, it came time for the others assembled there to speak up with a few ideas of their own. Time for the nameless guy to suggest that a group of them go charging in and grab Jacobs and run him out of town by force, and time for Mandy to suggest something-or-other. Some way of exorcizing the evil vibes of the place, she claimed. Though when she got into the specifics of her plan, something about drums and finger-cymbals and chanting, not to mention crystals and herbs and who knew what all else, she soon managed to lose everyone completely. Bemused smiles their only reply.

Smiles which were to vanish in an instant when suddenly Hugh piped up with a suggestion of his own. “We oughta slip em acid is what we oughta do,” he said in a deadly serious tone. And from the way he said it, it was impossible to tell whether he meant that the acid would be used as a way of punishing Jacobs and the others for their sins or as a way of magically converting them all into hippies.

Whatever his meaning may have been, though, Dave seemed to go right along with the idea. “Yeah, but how do we get it to em? What do we slip it into?”

“I don’t know. Some type-a booze, I suppose. Something that they all drink,” Hugh’s voice began to fade a bit.

Soon to be replaced by Mandy’s. “Oh no, ya can’t do that,” she objected.

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s like... Acid and booze? That’s firewater, man! It’s like... It’s firewater.”

Huh? What was she talking about?

“Like where the water’s on fire, ya know, and like it’s burning and everything’s melting and it’s all falling away. Ya know? Cause like everything’s breaking off into these little flakes and it keeps falling down and falling down. These colors and these drops and these... Oh man, it’s a bad trip.

“And ya know if ya go and put it in Coke, that’s like... Ka-pow! ya know. Like boom, bang. Like explosions, man. Like everything’s blowing up and like... It’s blowing your mind, ya know! Cause it’s a bummer, man, it’s a real bummer.”

Okay...

“But if ya go and put it in tea, that’s different. Cause then it’s like all clean and beautiful and stuff like that, ya know. Like with flowers and trees, and like you’re running around naked in the sunshine and you’re... That’s with jasmine tea, ya know. Cause it’s like life and happiness and stuff. And it’s... It’s beautiful, ya know.”

“So we gotta get em to drink jasmine tea?” Gabriel’s cousin asked innocently, apparently the only one at the table who was taking what she had to say seriously.

“Yeah, or mint tea,” Mandy added helpfully.

“Right!” Dave butted in before she could say any more, speaking in a tone that brooked no further discussion of the matter. And then as Mandy appeared to space-out on the beauties of acid with jasmine tea—or mint tea—the others looked on in silence as well. Expectantly, impatiently as though biding their time, or perhaps simply awaiting further instructions.

“Hey Mandy, I think there’s a customer over there that needs you.” It was Dave who finally broke the impasse just as it appeared to be gathering steam, pointing toward the far side of the room as he said it. And a nearly audible sigh of relief arose from his two companions when Mandy responded to his words by turning and walking away, leaving them with only a single uninvited guest in their midst. A guest who was far more tight-lipped than the one who had just left—or perhaps it was simply the fact that this one happened to be male, often an important consideration in those days, that culture—though whatever the case may have been, with her departure a new air seemed to come over that group of men all at once. An air as though now was the time for them to get down to some serious business.

Time for Dave to speak his mind at last as he said in a no-nonsense tone, “Do you know why we called off our picketing at Jacobs’ bar? The real reason, I mean.”

“Because it wasn’t working, I suppose,” Gabriel replied hesitantly.

“No, that’s not it. Or I mean... Yeah, it wasn’t working very good, I’ll admit that. But that’s not why we called it off.”

“No...?”

“No, we called it off because we, uh... Because... Like did you know that Jacobs carries a whole shit-load of fire insurance on his place?”

“Fire insurance?” Gabriel had no idea what the guy was driving at.

“I mean a shit-load of fire insurance. A whole lot more than what his place is even worth. And when you figure that he’s not making fuck-all for profits...” Dave trailed off as he left it to his listener to draw his own conclusion.

“So you think he... You figure he wants to... That he wants to see the place burned down?” Gabriel stammered out, slowly putting two and two together.

“Bingo!” Dave rapped his fist on the table for emphasis. And then after a few seconds, he added, “Or else he’s planning on burning the place himself and then blaming it on us.”

To which Gabriel’s only response was a long, quiet, “Oh-h-h...”

“Ya mean burn it down and then try to say that the hippies did it?” his cousin burst out in disbelief as he too began to catch on. “Blame it on one of us?”

“That’s right, my friend!” Dave answered emphatically as his two companions nodded their assent.

“Wow, that’s really...” Gabriel hesitated to say more, uncomfortable all at once with the direction the conversation was beginning to take.

“We don’t just think it. We know it!” Hugh chimed in as though to keep things flowing. “We know that he wants to see that place of his burned down and that he’s just waiting for the right moment.”

“He’s waiting for the right excuse,” Dave added. “Because I guess he decided that our picketing over there wasn’t quite good enough. It wasn’t a clear and obvious enough threat.”

“It wasn’t good enough...?”

“No. Because we never threatened to burn him out or anything like that. And in fact, we never said a damned thing about it. We never once used the word fire when we were there cause we didn’t want to...” Dave’s voice began to fade.

As Hugh quickly took up for him. “We didn’t want to encourage a fire karmically, that is. We didn’t want to see that place burn down, not under any circumstances. Because if it burns, then where the hell are we gonna put on our concerts?”

“Right...” Gabriel really didn’t want to hear any more, something in his guts telling him to get up and run away. To put an end to this thing right now.

“No, the only guy who stands to gain from that place burning down is Jacobs. He’s the only one who wins that way given the size of the insurance policy he’s got.” Dave was back in command of the conversation. “He’s the only one with a motive.”

“And why don’t you tell him about how we been watchin’ that guy and his place?” the nameless man from the Hash House interjected.

“Yeah, that’s right. We’ve been watching him for the last couple of days, cause we’ve been expecting him to try to torch the place ever since we called off our picketing. And we’ve been ready to step in and stop him before he can destroy the building, too. We’ve been waiting to bust him at it so that we can...”

“So we can catch him in the act and then force him to break that lease of his. Either break the lease or else go to prison for attempted arson,” Hugh finished Dave’s thought once again.

“Oh, I see. You catch him trying to burn his place down and then... He’s gone. He’s outa there.”

“Exactly!” said Dave. “That’s exactly it.”

“Wow,” Gabriel said mildly, hoping against hope that they were now at the end of the subject.

As meanwhile his cousin still seemed to be having trouble digesting the idea. “Ya mean he really wants to burn his own place? Just like that? Just burn it down and then blame it on us?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what he’s planning on doing,” Dave responded. “Or at least that’s what we think he’s planning. Though of course he hasn’t, uh... He hasn’t tried to do anything yet even though he had a pretty good excuse for it a few days ago with the picketing and all that. But still, he’s gonna...”

“He’ll try it sooner or later,” Hugh took up for the other man yet again. “He’ll try it once he thinks the time is right. Or once he receives the proper, uh... the proper provocation, shall we say.”

“That’s right. The proper provocation,” Dave repeated.

“The proper...?” Gabriel didn’t like the sound of that phrase. “You mean...”

“We mean that we have to convince him that it’s worth doing it,” Dave explained. “We have to convince him that the time is right and that he should go out there and set the place on fire and then. Pow! We got him! We bust his ass and he’s outa there. Forever!!”

“Wow, that’s uh...” Gabriel did his best to stall, looking away and refusing to acknowledge the destination toward which the conversation was so obviously heading.

So that had it not been for that cousin of his... “Wow, so he wants to blame it on us.”

“Yes! Or more correctly, he wants to blame it on *you*! Gabriel. That’s what we think now, anyway,” Dave was back on the move. “Because we know something about your, uh... your history with him. We know that the two of you...”

“That we hate each other’s guts!?” Gabriel’s emotions rose to his throat despite his desire not to feed this thing. Because the mere thought of Jacobs. The mere thought! “We sure as hell do hate each other! But where did you find out about that?”

“Oh, we just... We’ve heard things, though there was never anything specific. It’s just that we... We saw a few things and we heard a few things.”

“Like from that asshole? Is that where you heard it from?”

“From him and from other places, too,” Dave responded evasively. “But what we’ve figured out now is that it’s all up to you. That you’re the only one around here that he hates bad

enough to really provoke him. And it's only you that can make him take the risk and go out there and actually try to torch the place."

"Me!?" Suddenly Gabriel was in shock as the very thing he had been dreading had come to pass. And as all eyes turned upon him, he felt his consciousness shrinking in upon itself almost like he had just dropped acid. Sliding backward through that long, dark corridor in its flight from the present scene. Sliding further, ever further away from the here and the now as it sought out some other world instead, some inner place of peace and comfort. Some place so far away, so deep inside that he couldn't have acted right then had he tried. Couldn't have spoken as he sat in helpless silence while the others went on with their efforts to make their case.

"Yes you," said Dave. "Because if you were to go over there and threaten him. And especially if you were to do it in front of witnesses. Cause I mean then..."

"Yes, if you were to threaten him and to do it in public, why then we're sure that he'd try to burn the place down the first chance he got. That very night most likely," Hugh added tag-team style.

"Yeah, that very night," Dave reiterated. And then over the next few minutes, as the two of them took turns in that way, making their arguments again and again, Gabriel said nothing. Tried not to hear the words as instead he let them bounce harmlessly about in the great emptiness which his mind had become.

I don't wanta hear this. I don't wanta hear this, his inner voice kept saying, kept repeating almost like a mantra. I don't wanta hear this. Until suddenly it was interrupted by his outer voice, speaking from... From where? The words seeming to pour out of their own accord. "Right, he'd burn it down and collect the insurance while I got sent off to prison. Oh, that'd be great. Just great!"

"Except that he'll never pull it off," Dave spoke with conviction, confidence. "Because we're gonna be there when he tries, and we're gonna bust his ass! So the only one that'll be going to prison is Jacobs. He's the only one that'll get in trouble. And the only thing that you've gotta do..."

"The only thing I've gotta do is stick my neck out for him to chop it off while you guys sit back and watch." Gabriel's outer voice continued to fight back despite his struggle not to listen, not even to himself. "The only thing I've gotta do is stick my neck into the noose while he pulls on it."

"No, it's not gonna be like that. Not at all." Dave was almost pleading now. "Because there's not gonna be any danger to you. None at all. Not when we'll be watching him every minute. All day and all night."

"Yeah, right..."

"No, it's true. Cause we've already been watching him. We've been watching him for days now. Every move he makes. And we've even got people watching his bar in case he gets

past us. People who are out there right now as we speak. With cameras. Cause we're ready for him no matter what he does. We're ready to get him! Ready to bust his ass! I swear we are."

"Yeah...?" In spite of all his efforts to resist, that calm tone and those reassuring words seemed to be drawing Gabriel relentlessly back toward that thing we call reality. Pulling him steadily away from the safe place where he longed to be and back toward that other realm instead. That world of pain, of danger...

"Yeah, cause we've got him covered, and we know every move he makes. So there's no way that he could pull anything and get away with it. No way!"

"No...?"

"No way!" Hugh echoed, speaking in a forceful voice. "No way he could pull anything off."

And Hugh was quickly seconded by the nameless guy. "No way! No fuckin' way!"

"And all I have to do..."

"All you have to do is go out there and provoke him a little bit. And after that, we'll take care of the rest of it. You just have to give him a little shove, that's all."

"Just a little...?"

"Yeah, Uncle Gabriel. Just a little shove," his cousin joined the chorus.

Sending the last of Gabriel's resistance crumbling as he saw that everyone was against him now, everyone was urging him to... To give in to all that pressure as he always seemed to do and to... to... To die! To go out there and sacrifice himself. And so it was with visions of impending martyrdom before his eyes that he bowed to the will of the majority at last. Resignation in his voice as he told them, "Okay, I'll do it." Spoken with the calm indifference of one who knows that the end is nigh. "I'll go take care of Jacobs."

Which was precisely what he set out to do the next day. Putting on his finest hippie shirt and his fanciest beads while taking special care in combing his hair and beard since he wanted everything to be perfect that day. He wanted to look his best when he went out to make the heroic sacrifice which he knew was destined to become legendary within that local hippie community. His community! Don't forget about that. The community which he himself had created from nothing and for whose good he was about to go out and give his all.

Or at least for whose good he was about to go do something very unpleasant. About to go visit the one man he hated more than anyone else in the entire world. And he knew that it was going to take a lot for him to do that, an awful lot as he spent all morning trying to build himself up for it. Walking around the coffeehouse muttering to himself and trying to get psyched up while barely aware of what was going on around him. Because his mind was somewhere else the whole time. It was facing off with Jacobs already, telling him exactly what he thought of him.

Telling him that he was a lowlife and a scumbag and that he'd better get out of town. And Gabriel meant now. Right now! By sundown.

Oh, the things he was going to say to that guy, the clever insults and the quick comebacks. Because he was going to humiliate him was what. He was going to destroy the guy, going to give him such a tongue-lashing that he'd never dare to show his face around that neighborhood again. And it was going to be so beautiful! Gabriel told himself each time that he played the scenario out in his head. Always ending with Jacobs skulking off in utter defeat, with his tail between his legs, while Gabriel bowed slightly to the applause of those who had been watching. Always ending in complete and total victory.

Because he was going to tell Jacobs off once and for all. He was going to say all the things that he had never managed to say before, the things that he had never been able to express. And not only the personal things either. No, he was going to destroy the guy on the philosophical level as well. He was going to argue down everything that Jacobs threw at him, every criticism of the Beats or the hippies or anyone else. He was going to tear those arguments apart one after another until finally Jacobs would be forced to surrender. And he wasn't going to get all angry and confused and all... He wasn't going to fall into the traps that he always used to fall into back in the old days, back when he would get so damned frustrated at his inability to express himself. When Jacobs would come at him with one clever comment after another while the best he could do would be to call the guy names or to... Oh, those were bad days back then, all those petty insults and those futile arguments. Those arguments which had gotten to be so bad and so one-sided in Jacobs' favor that Gabriel had finally refused to say another word to the guy ever again, finally taken his refuge in silence.

But that was then and this was now, Gabriel told himself as he looked ahead. This was the argument that he was going to win at last, the one that he was finally going to pull out. Because how could he fail now? On this day when he had not only the entire hippie community behind him but when he had Vishnu on his side as well. Vishnu or God or Allah or whatever name you want to call Him. That God who had created this waterfront neighborhood just for them, just for the hippies. Created the place and then given it to them, Gabriel was sure that He had since there could be no other explanation for the tremendous success which they had enjoyed over the last few weeks. The growth, the prosperity if you could call it that, while Jacobs and his ilk had been in steady retreat the whole time. Because if that wasn't proof of the will of Vishnu, then what else could it be? He couldn't be on the side of the losers, could He? He couldn't be backing Jacobs since the guy wouldn't be losing if He was, right? So Vishnu had to be on their side. He just had to. Vishnu or God or whatever name you want to call Him.

Whether he had Vishnu on his side or not, though, Gabriel felt a growing anxiety as the moment of truth drew ever nearer, a mounting desire to have someone accompany him and back him up when he went on his mission into the hostile territory around Jacobs' bar. Because the thought of taking on Jacobs all alone, Jacobs along with however many Local thugs happened to be hanging around...? No! He needed someone to go there with him. Someone like that big, overgrown semi-relative of his, standing beside him and giving him support and covering his back... And of course the kid said yes the moment he was asked, said that he was glad to go, like always. Glad to be there whenever things were happening.

And so it was only a matter of minutes after that, with the request made and accepted, and with no more excuses for the older man to put things off any longer, that the two of them were out the door and on their way. The kid striding along purposefully while Gabriel hung back a bit, taking the opportunity to play the coming scenario out in his head one last time. To say this to Jacobs and to say that, and to watch him as he cringed and shriveled and finally slunk off in defeat. Winning every time, every single time.

So that had it not been for that cousin of his, slowing down and butting in all at once... “Are ya okay, Uncle Gabriel?”

“Okay...? Yeah, sure. Of course I’m okay.”

“Yeah? Cause it’s just that... It’s just...” the kid stammered uncertainly.

“It’s just that what? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that... Like ya know, ya really had people wonderin’ yesterday with the way ya went and spaced-out so bad there for awhile.”

“The way I...? Oh, you mean that?” Gabriel tried to laugh it off. “That was nothing. It was just... It was nothing.” But then as they continued on their way, Gabriel found that the interruption had made him lose his train of thought so completely that now rather than living out his future triumph yet again, his mind was being drawn instead back to that day and that time. That moment of... of confusion, shall we call it? It was looking backward and trying to explain the incident to itself. Trying to place it all in a positive light.

And he was still struggling to achieve that end when the two of them turned the final corner that brought them within sight of Jacobs’ bar. Still stuck on that incident from the day before when suddenly the sight of the building ahead brought his attention snapping back to the present moment and the mission that lay ahead. The one in which he was about to confront Jacobs and hit him with all those... those... What were they? All those clever insults and those quick comebacks which he had been preparing in his head all morning. All those... What had they been? Those words, those phrases. Why was it that he couldn’t remember a single one of them? Not one!

Because instead Gabriel’s mind was a complete blank as he veered out into the street, followed by his cousin. As he came to a halt in an empty parking space out front, the nearest his body would allow him to come to Jacobs’ bar, before turning to stand facing the door. Fighting the urge to run away, to go off somewhere and try to recompose himself while he struggled to recall those... all those...

“Aren’t ya supposed to yell at him or somethin’, Uncle Gabriel?” the kid whispered as the silence dragged on.

Huh, what’s that? Yell at him? Yell what? What am I supposed to...? “Hey Jacobs!” Gabriel shouted at last, his voice wobbling and wavering despite his best effort. “Jacobs! I’m talking to you!!”

It didn't take long for the enemy to make his first appearance, slithering up to the front door where he peered outside only to turn around and make some sort of comment to the people in the bar behind him. A moment later he was gone from view while Gabriel continued to stand and stare, while he repeated his challenge in as steady a voice as he could, and while he waited after that. Waited until finally the guy appeared at the door once again, came walking all the way out onto the sidewalk to meet his long-time enemy head-on.

Jacobs! Tall and fit and handsome in a short-haired, conservative sort of way. He took a step or two forward as several young Locals crowded up to the doorway he had just exited, some of them spilling out onto the sidewalk themselves. And then as Jacobs stopped, he stared right back, looking straight into Gabriel's face for what seemed like minutes. Hours. He stood and returned Gabriel's hard, silent gaze, though in the end it was he that broke the stalemate. "Hey, don't you know that we got a leash law around here?" he yelled at Gabriel's cousin all at once. "What you lettin' him go runnin' around loose for?"

"Huh?" the kid said.

While his uncle growled, "Very funny, asshole!"

"Funny? You call that funny?" Jacobs shot back quickly. "No, that's not funny. What's funny is that clown suit you're wearin'. Cause it's gotta be the funniest thing I ever saw."

"Clown suit...?" Gabriel was already starting to lose control of the situation to that fast-talking jerk.

"Yeah, cause where did you get it from, anyway? Did you steal it off some bag-lady? Or did she throw it away or what?"

"No..." Gabriel stammered as he searched his brain for a comeback. Searched until... "Asshole!" was all that he could come up with

"Hey, that's not fair! You already called me an asshole once, so you've gotta use a different name this time. Like for instance, you could call me a son-of-a-bitch or a cocksucker or something like that. So why don't you go ahead and do it? Why don't you call me a cocksucker?"

"You... You...!" The anger, the frustration were rising so quickly within him that Gabriel couldn't think of a single word to say. Not one.

"Or how about shit-for-brains? Why don't you call me...? Oh no, wait a minute. It's you that's got shit for brains."

"Oh just... Shut up!" was the only phrase that came to Gabriel's lips. "Shut up! Shut up!!"

"Now that's really weak. That's even worse than calling me an asshole again. It's a loser of a comeback is what it is. It's as big of a loser as you are, you loser! Always have been and always will be."

“Shut up!! Shut up!!”

“Wow, you know what? It looks like all those drugs you’ve been taking haven’t done you a bit of good, cause you’re even stupider now than what you used to be. And that’s awful hard to do considering that you always used to be such a complete idiot. But now... Jesus, I can’t even believe it!”

Jacobs went on and on with his insults after that as Gabriel stood half-mute. Too consumed with anger to speak in any intelligible way, while Jacobs had himself a field day in face of his opponent’s verbal impotence. While he insulted Gabriel up and down and sideways. Insulted his brains and his masculinity and his family heritage and his courage, and he even insulted the size of his penis. And throughout the ordeal, Gabriel could do nothing but steam, nothing but fumble about helplessly for some way to vent his fury.

Because what he wanted to do was to charge at the guy. Wanted to run up there and beat the living shit out of that big mouth of his, wanted to... And he would have, too, had he not known deep inside that he was the one who would end up taking the beating. From Jacobs alone, even without the help of all those Locals who stood there laughing at him. Laughing! While all he could do in response was to take it. Helpless. His mind a blinding-white sea of rage. And it was only when his cousin half-whispered to him, “Hey Uncle Gabriel. What about the fire? What about sayin’ somethin’ about a fire?” that Gabriel finally found an outlet for his wrath.

“You know, somebody oughta burn this place of yours down!” he bellowed all at once in a voice saturated with hate.

A hatred so manifest that Jacobs seemed to falter at the sound of it. “You say what? You say you wanta burn my place?”

“Not me. Somebody!” Gabriel went on, his voice quaking with emotion. “Cause I don’t know how it is that this place of yours is still standing, as much of an asshole as you are and as many people hate your guts. I don’t know how it is that nobody’s burned it down yet.”

Suddenly it was Jacobs who stood tongue-tied, more at the intensity of the speech than at its contents, it appeared. And he clammed up so completely in response that soon Gabriel found himself to be in command and control in a way that he had never been before in his dealings with that asshole. Enjoying a sense of power, of dominance such as he had never known. And he loved the feeling. Loved it so much that he couldn’t help but repeat his threats again and again. Because it felt so good, so very good. While the expression on Jacobs’ face? Oh, it was priceless!

So marvelous, so uplifting that Gabriel could have gone on that way all day long. Could have and might have, too, had his cousin not tugged on his sleeve after the umpteenth repetition. Whispered, “Enough already,” before finally grabbing him by the arm and leading him away. Down the street where the two of them walked with their heads held high in triumph. Their mission accomplished, their message delivered, and their opponent so thoroughly vanquished that not a single threat, not a single insult was hurled after them.

Gabriel was elated as the two of them made their way back to The Bean-In. Elated in a way that he couldn’t describe, whether from pride in his victory or from the humiliation of those

earlier insults. All he knew was that the adrenaline was flowing in a way that it hadn't flowed in years, and he felt great. He felt wonderful. The best he ever had—without chemical assistance. On a high that seemed to go on all day, all afternoon and into the evening as his exalted emotions gradually ripened and evolved from simple exhilaration into something that more closely resembled a thirst. An alcohol thirst. A desire for that one substance capable of soothing still-jangling nerves such as his. And it was a thirst that grew nothing but stronger as the evening progressed, grew and grew until finally it sent him out to a bar for the first drink that he'd had in months. The first drink and the second and more. Many more. So many drinks that by the time he staggered home and crawled into bed late that night, he was really and truly drunk for the first time in years. Six months anyway.

And he was hard asleep when a banging noise began to rouse him ever so slowly from the blackness, a noise that would stop for a minute only to start back up again. So persistent that finally he had to get up and go see what the hell it was about, shuffling over to the door to his apartment, groggy and still quite drunk. Opening the door to find his cousin standing there, excitement written all over his face. "They got him, Uncle Gabriel!" the kid blurted out. "They got him. They got him."

"Who?"

"Jacobs! They got Jacobs!"

"Jacobs?" The sound of that name made a slight impact upon Gabriel's deeply fermented brain. A very slight impact.

"Yeah, they got him! They caught him tryin' to burn his place down, and they busted him."

"Jacobs, huh...?"

"Yeah Jacobs. So come on! Ya gotta go see it," the kid urged his uncle on, evidently convinced that his own enthusiasm had to be contagious.

"What the...? What time is it?" Gabriel finally managed to mumble in reply.

"It's like four-somethin' or maybe five. But come on! Ya really gotta see this!" the kid went on as though ready to grab on and drag the older man along with him. Though when his uncle's only response was a longing glance back in the direction of his bed, soon the kid was trying a different tack. "Cause you're the hero, ya know. You're the guy who everyone wants to see. So ya gotta be there."

"Hero...?" Another word had been found which was capable of making an impact upon Gabriel's booze-benumbed mind.

"Yeah, you're the man right now. You're the guy who set up Jacobs, ya know, so like you're the hero."

Jacobs. Hero. Both of the words had just been repeated, both of them in the same sentence. And then as Gabriel heard them and heard them again, being repeated by his cousin one time after another, his interest was slowly but steadily aroused. Almost against his will, though aroused so inexorably that in the end he found himself agreeing to go. Off to the scene of the crime.

When the two of them arrived at Jacobs' bar, they found a small crowd of people, thirty or forty or even more, standing around on the otherwise deserted street. A crowd that included all the usual faces from the Hash House and Starry Night gangs along with a number of fresh ones. And meanwhile in the midst of that crowd, surrounded by freaks on every side, stood the unmistakable figure of Jacobs. Stoop-shouldered now and with his head hung in shame, he stood the very embodiment of defeat and disgrace, while arrayed before him were the most familiar of all the freaks. The steering committee, the three guys who had come to visit Gabriel the day before. Or was that two days before? They were saying something to Jacobs, admonishing him evidently. Though it wasn't long after Gabriel's arrival that suddenly the three of them turned and began to walk away. The deal done and the show over, it appeared, as the crowd began to break up in their wake.

And it was only after the gang of three had moved off several steps, walking in the general direction of Gabriel and his cousin, that Jacobs ever dared to raise his head. Dared to look off in the direction in which they were going, where he immediately caught sight of Gabriel, standing there in all innocence. He spotted his old enemy, and with that the man burst back to life in an instant. "You!!" Jacobs shouted at the top of his lungs, shattering the serenity of the urban night with a voice that reverberated off the silent buildings. "I knew you had to be behind this, you piece of hippie shit!"

Jacobs sounded hysterical, and as he lunged forward, he had to be restrained by the nearest freaks. Held back and frustrated in his attempt to launch a physical assault so that instead the only avenue left open to him was his voice. The only channel through which to express his indignation, his outrage, his wounded pride. All of it directed at Gabriel. "I knew it had to be you. And I'm gonna get you for this. I swear I am! I'm gonna get even someday!! You just watch me! Someday when you're not expecting it and you got no one around to protect you, I'm gonna get you. And I'm gonna get you good! I'm gonna kill you! I swear I am. I'm gonna destroy you!!" He vented all his passion, his thirst for vengeance, upon Gabriel with insults and threats that grew more extreme by the second. Profanity-laden outbursts and eternal curses and name-calling. So many names, so many ugly names. Until all at once he fell silent, turned abruptly and stomped off in the opposite direction.

With Jacobs' dramatic departure, the members of the steering committee resumed their journey after having stopped to listen to the harangue, Hugh slowing down a bit as he passed Gabriel's way. "Sure is a good thing that we got him to sign this before he saw you, isn't it?" he said, waving a document which he held in his hand.

The nameless guy barely acknowledged Gabriel's existence as he went by, giving a slight nod of his head, and it was only Dave who came to a full halt. Stopped to say a few words to the supposed hero of the day. "Well, you see that it worked, huh?" he began before going on to explain everything that had happened that night. To tell about how one of the people hiding out

to watch the bar had spotted Jacobs sneaking around outside an hour or two earlier and how the guy had gotten out his camera and taken pictures of everything Jacobs did as he prepared to set the place on fire. How just at the last minute, just as Jacobs was about to strike the match, the guy with the camera, along with a few others he had managed to alert, had jumped out and stopped him and how, with freaks suddenly starting to stream into the area from all sides, with Jacobs soon being presented with the fact that they had unimpeachable photographic proof of what he had just been caught trying to do, they had finally persuaded him to give up the fight. To avoid being sent to jail for attempted arson by signing his lease over to Hugh, the leader of the Starry Night gang. By getting the hell out of the way and letting the hippies put on their concert, or rather their series of concerts.

As Dave finished his explanation and prepared to take his leave, he hesitated for a moment as though debating with himself. "Hey, we're havin' a little thing over at H-House if you wanta come," he said at last in an obligatory sort of way, with no enthusiasm in his voice and no encouragement for Gabriel to say yes. "We're gonna be, uh... celebrating this thing, I guess you could say. And we're also gonna get down to some serious planning for the first concert." The first Happening of the Summer of Love, though he didn't use that term.

Gabriel responded with a, "Thanks anyway," his own enthusiasm for being present at a party of that sort even lower than Dave's enthusiasm for having him there appeared to be. His desire to be present at a victory party in which he would have no part, he could see that coming. See that it was going to be *their* victory party, the celebration of *their* victory over Jacobs. And as he began to think about the party and the upcoming concert and everything else in that light, Gabriel had to ask himself how it was that his own contribution to the victory seemed to have been so quickly forgotten.

Because how was it that all the praise out on the street that night had gone to Hugh and the others on the steering committee, or to the guy who had caught Jacobs, while none of it had come to him? Not a word of it. Like he hadn't even been there or like he hadn't done a thing. And instead the only thing to come his way had been all that abuse and those threats from Jacobs. Because no one had stopped to say thank you to him for what he had done. Not even Dave had used those words. And no one had defended him before Jacobs, either. Not one of them. No one had said, "Yeah, this is the guy who busted your ass!" but instead everyone had held back. And they had even given him strange looks like, What type of weird animal is that? As though none of them had the least idea of what he had done or why Jacobs would be attacking him in that way. None of them, not a single one.

And it was sad. It was discouraging as Gabriel asked himself, Where is the justice in this? Why is it that Dave and Hugh and those other guys get all the credit for what happened while I get all the blame? I get all the venom and the hatred and the vows for revenge from Jacobs. So is that fair? No! Not one bit. Not one freaking bit!

Whatever the justice of the situation may have been, though, the victory over Jacobs was to mark an important turning point in the development of the hippie community that spring. Mark the end of an entire phase of that development, in fact. The phase during which they'd had to contend with an organized, coherent Local resistance to their continued growth. Because with the disappearance of Jacobs' bar, the last of the diehards had lost their central rallying point.

They had lost the place where they could gather and plot, so that from that point on their resistance would quickly become disorganized and scattered, soon to become little more than anecdotal. And what that meant was that now—and forever—that old waterfront neighborhood was theirs and theirs alone. It was the undisputed home of the hippies. On top of which the first big concert at the Starry Night lay just around the corner, the first hippie Happening that city had ever seen, and a Happening which the organizers intended to use as the public announcement of their existence and their intentions. The coming-out party and the celebration of the coming-of-age of the local hippie community. The celebration of the fact that now peace had finally come to that community so full of peace and love. That the problems and conflicts of the spring now lay behind them while ahead lay nothing but the Summer of Love.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: A MORNING TO MOURN

While the mythologizers of the hippie experience may fondly recall the spring and summer of 1967 as being a time of peace and love, the truth is that both those commodities were in short supply in the cities of the United States during that year. The war in Vietnam was in full swing, while at the same time urban decay and white flight to the suburbs were having a devastating impact upon the inner cities. They were leaving behind cityscapes which in some cases were nearly post-apocalyptic. And that's not to mention the many problems being faced by the ghettos, most notably that of urban unrest as one ghetto after another erupted into open warfare against the white establishment during that decade. And in fact, it was during the very Summer of Love that the ghettos of both Newark and Detroit spun completely out of control, that they became authentic warzones for weeks at a time.

And the tension would be so palpable even in times of "peace," the anger so near the surface, that it could be worth the life of a white person to venture into the ghetto in those turbulent years. Even the life of a white hippie/progressive who probably would have been shocked to discover that despite his or her own feelings of sympathy and solidarity toward blacks, virtually none of that sympathy was returned. That for them the ghetto was every bit as much a place of danger as it was for any other white person. Danger and perhaps adventure as well, depending upon your frame of mind. The adventure of entering and exploring a dark and often hostile urban wilderness.

I myself was a frequent visitor to the ghetto at that time, frequent though cautious as I made it a point never to go there alone. I was never foolish enough to do something like that, but instead I would always go in the company of my friend and brother Hezekiah, a native of the very ghetto which the two of us would so often visit. Hez who, while he may have been born and raised in poverty, had never allowed the deprivation and hardships of his upbringing to hold him back or to affect him in any way, as instead he had developed into the finest example of black manhood that I've ever had the pleasure to meet. The finest example of manhood in any color. A man who combined the best of Africa with the best of America. Strong and handsome and agile, he could have been a stellar athlete had he been so inclined. And at the same time he was intelligent and forthright and generous. A man of such high character, such moral courage and such fortitude, that with a companion like him by my side, of course I hadn't the least fear of venturing into that world of peril.

Venturing there as I did on one particular morning when Hez and I went out on a scavenging trip into one of the most forbidding parts of the entire ghetto. Looking about for whatever we could find in an old abandoned light-industrial area, a place more frequented by rats and stray dogs than it was by human beings. Though as we journeyed about that day, we noticed several young black men skulking about within that world of ruin and decay. Young men whom Hez with his ghetto-sharpened senses was able to spot before they spotted us so that we managed to keep our own presence a secret, and young men whose gang affiliation was so obvious in a couple of cases that even I was able to discern it with my untrained white eye. Even I was able to see that they were Dingoes. Or more properly speaking, they were members of the Mandingo Warriors, a lying and thieving bunch of ghetto trash who generally referred to themselves simply as Mandingoes, and to whom Hez and I always referred by that shortened epithet.

We asked ourselves what a bunch of violence-prone miscreants like them could possibly want around there, in a neighborhood where there were so few potential victims for them to rob or rape or murder. So few opportunities to ply their vicious trade. But then it wasn't long before there appeared upon the scene the very people for whom they must have been lying in wait: a small band of people, a black man and two pretty young hippie girls that he was leading directly toward those lurking Dingoes. Directly into an ambush.

"We've gotta help em," I said as I saw those two young innocents being led to their doom. Said it even as Hez was already on his way, ready to expose himself to the view of the evil ones if that was what it would take to save those girls from their fate.

And so within a matter of moments after spotting them, the two of us were stepping out into their path, into the middle of what had once been a sidewalk. Our appearance so sudden that the golden-haired hippie girl shrank back in fright, though as for the dark-haired one, she was completely uncowed, advancing boldly up to me, the first white face she had seen in quite some time, evidently. Walking up and asking me for directions to the free clinic which a group of white do-gooders had recently established in the ghetto.

"The free clinic? Around here?" I was amazed to hear that being stated as their destination since it lay in the opposite direction from the one in which they were traveling. "No, it's way over there," I said, pointing off in the direction from which they had just come.

"Over there...?" The dark-haired girl looked about in confusion.

And then when I noticed the questioning look which she gave to the black man who accompanied them, I felt the need to find out more about him. "What, doesn't he know where it is?" I asked, indicating that man who was apparently serving as their guide.

"I'm afraid that he got a little bit confused," she said in apology.

"Confused? And he brought you into this area? That's awful damn confused for someone who's supposed to know his way around here," I shot back before turning to that so-called guide to question him directly. "So what happened? How'd ya get lost?"

The man wouldn't answer my questions, though, and he refused to meet my eye, glancing about instead while mumbling, "You know how it is, man," and, "Honest mistake, ya know,"

and things of that sort. Dodging my questions even when I asked for his name as he mumbled some unintelligible reply.

And it wasn't until that futile questioning had gone on for a minute, two minutes, that finally Hez leaned over and whispered into my ear, "He's a Dingo." Because with his ghetto-trained eyes, he had managed to spot signs which had eluded my own whiteman's vision.

A Dingo! The guide's eyes grew wide at the sound of that overheard phrase, and an instant later he was turning to run off as fast as his legs would carry him. To leave the little group of us standing there alone. Four people cut off and surrounded in that savage and unforgiving world, easy prey for the packs of Dingoes who stalked the area.

Being all too aware of the danger that we faced, Hez and I immediately took charge of the situation and led those two girls away from that spot as quickly as we could. Before the Dingoes could gather around and swoop down upon us. We led them away, and we led them through the usual series of adventures that were to be expected when a group of white people traveled through a ghetto in those days. The chases and the escapes and the gun-battles and the rescues. And it was only after an hour or so that the group of us finally managed to reach the free clinic, arriving there only to find that the building in which it was housed was under a state of siege.

With the clinic completely surrounded by a mob that filled the carless streets and the sidewalks. Radicals and activists and other high-minded types at the heart of the crowd perhaps, though they were far outnumbered by the curious and other hangers-on who loitered about, scattered amongst them some of the lowest of the low. Junkies and Dingoes and other assorted reprobates. While leading it all was a man with a bullhorn, a man who kept up a constant chatter, insulting those inside the clinic and making wild accusations against them. Accusing them of trying to poison the neighborhood with their drugs, of trying to weaken and destroy the last of the free, strong black men. And he yelled into his bullhorn again and again that they didn't want white people coming around that neighborhood of theirs. That those in the clinic should get the hell out and get out now.

The four of us soon managed to sneak inside, a feat which wasn't as difficult as it might seem since the attention of the crowd outside was focused upon preventing people from leaving the clinic rather than preventing them from entering. Though as we gained the interior of the building, we quickly discovered that the situation inside was even more dire than what it had appeared from the street, with the building not only surrounded but with the utilities cut off as well, the electricity and the water and the phone-line. And since all this took place back in the dark ages, back in the days before people had cell-phones, the cutting of those phone-lines meant that the clinic had lost all contact with the outside world.

The director of the place seemed to be completely over his head as he tried to deal with the situation outside, while as for the others inside, most of them just hung around doing nothing, apathetic and demoralized. Not even listening as the director paced about while thinking aloud, asking, "What can we do? How can we keep this place going? How can we make those people stop?" So lost in his thoughts that he seemed not even to notice our arrival. And it wasn't until

the two hippie girls went over and gave him the big hugs of dear old friends that he finally broke out of his solitary reverie.

“You shouldn’t have come,” was the first thing he told them. “Because look at what’s going on around here. Look at what they’re doing to us,” he added before going on to moan and complain about those outside. To say that he couldn’t understand why it was that the crowd had decided to pick on them, why they would be attacking a group of people who had come there for the sole purpose of helping the local residents by giving them the medical attention that they needed—why they would believe those false rumors that someone had been spreading around. Because it wasn’t fair, it just wasn’t fair. On top of which it wasn’t logical. It didn’t make the least bit of sense for those people to be doing what they were. So then why were they doing it? Why? Why!?

The director babbled on in that way for some time, repeating his complaints again and again, until all at once he cut himself off. Called out an instant later to announce to one and all that his decision had been made and that everyone should gather around to listen, those who had been cowering in the back rooms and those who had been wandering about aimlessly. And then as he stood and watched his bedraggled troops assemble before him, mooney faces raised to listen, he soon went on to tell them that as far as he could see, they had no other choice. They would have to give in to the demands of the man with the bullhorn. Have to vacate the premises before the place was stormed by the mob or burned by it.

With those words the people began to come alive at last, walking around gathering up everything that they could carry with them, the instruments and the medicines and the records. Leaving nothing of value behind since the building was sure to be plundered the moment they were gone. And it wasn’t long before they had everything bundled up and ready to go, ready to be carried along as they set out upon their forlorn journey toward the distant safety of an adjacent neighborhood. Ready for their leader’s, “Okay, we’re coming out!” followed by the opening of the door. The filing outside of that motley and defeated bunch who slowly began to make their way up the street, shuffling along with heads bowed.

They hadn’t gone far, though, the last of them barely clear of the clinic doors, when suddenly there came a shout from somewhere in the crowd that stood and watched them go. A shout made by whom? By that faithless guide? By someone else? A shout at the sound of which suddenly the gates of hell seemed to come flying open. Dingoes and other hoods and hooligans charging at the clinic volunteers even as the man with the bullhorn ordered them to stop. Stop!! Knocking people to the ground and tearing open the bundles they carried, flinging papers to the breeze and smashing instruments while junkies scuttled about trying to pocket any drugs they could find. While Dingoes kicked and beat the victims as they lay helpless in the street.

In face of the onslaught, Hez and I fought for all that we were worth, defending ourselves and those around us. Our hands so full in the midst of that mass of confusion that we could do nothing as we saw in the distance how the guide swooped down upon the rear of the procession all at once and grabbed hold of the golden-haired hippie girl. How he picked her up, too weak from fright to resist, and ran off with her in his arms while the dark-haired girl ran behind, refusing to abandon her friend to the unspeakable fate which surely awaited her.

The two of us went in search of that deceitful guide and his captives at the first opportunity we got, trailed them high and low through every danger that the ghetto had to offer. We chased them and were chased by others, and we fought and set ambushes and were ambushed in turn. Until finally we managed to track them down, to discover that the girls were being held by the guide and a number of his fellow Dingoes at an old, nearly-abandoned community center. One in which Hez had spent a part of his youth. We were told that they were there, and we immediately set out for the place, entered it in order to flush them out.

A conference between Hez and his mentor, the grey-haired director of the center who had known him since he was a child, a decision by that venerable old man to expel the intruders from the safety of his building, and finally another chase. The final chase. One in which the guide and his henchmen chose to leave the golden-haired girl behind and to take along only the stronger and faster of the two, only the one who wouldn't slow them down.

Hez and I were in hot pursuit from the moment we learned of their backdoor departure, my fleet-footed friend leaving me further and further behind with each step he took as though spurred on by the fires of vengeance and justice which burned in his breast. And in his eagerness to catch the guide and save the girl, he seemed to have thrown all caution to the wind, to have forgotten what it could mean for him to arrive there alone and have to take on that whole group of Dingoes by himself. He seemed to have forgotten, or perhaps he just didn't care. Perhaps the danger to himself meant nothing to him anymore.

That's what I like to tell myself anyway, that Hez had reached the point where he no longer cared about himself, his own life. Where he was ready to die for something that he believed in. Because it's comforting to me now when I tell myself that. When I make myself believe that his death that day actually meant something. His life and his death. When I convince myself that that noblest, that worthiest of all the men I've ever known didn't die in vain.

THE FRUITS OF VICTORY

As the day of the first concert at the Starry Night drew near, the day of the Happening, Gabriel had no intention of going there and being a part of it. Though it wasn't that he had anything against Happenings. No, far from it. Because hadn't he been at the Great Human Be-In a few months earlier? Yes, he had. And he had nothing against this particular Happening either, this... whatever name it was that its organizers had given it. No, the only reason he refused to attend was because of the way in which the whole thing had been brought about and because of some of the people behind it. Those people who had used him in their fight against Jacobs and then tossed him aside like he was so much garbage. Made him take all the risks while they took the credit and the glory for themselves. That bunch of... he didn't want to say what!

And he wouldn't have gone to it, either. He really wouldn't had it not been for a chance encounter of the day before the concert, an accidental meeting with Dave, the only member of that entire crowd with whom he had ever shared any rapport whatsoever. Because when the two of them ran into each other and spoke briefly that day, Dave quickly responded to Gabriel's

statement that he wasn't going to the concert with a, "But how can you miss it? You, the guest of honor."

Guest of honor? Me!? Wow, he hadn't realized that. He hadn't known that the Hash Housers and Starry Nighters were planning on giving him that sort of honor on the night of the Happening. That sort of salute in recognition of all the contributions he had made. And if they were going to do something like that, why then of course he would have to be there. Because how could the guest of honor not attend?

And so it was in light of that news that Gabriel spent the rest of the day and the night and the following day psyching himself up for his appearance at the great event. Preparing himself mentally for his moment of glory while wondering what exactly his role might be. Like would they expect him to get up there and give a speech? Or would he simply have to wave to the crowd after being introduced? Wave in acknowledgement of their applause. He wasn't sure what to expect. So that in the end he decided that just in case, it might be a good idea to go ahead and work out a short little speech. One in which he would thank the crowd and the organizers for thanking him, and perhaps he would thank Vishnu as well.

As the time of his big moment finally drew near, as the evening arrived and he started out for the concert—the Happening—Gabriel was surprised to see what a huge event it was turning out to be. Much bigger than anything he had imagined. Bigger than anyone had imagined, it appeared, as rather than being a simple coming-out party for the local scene, the night was turning into a virtual explosion. An eruption. As though there had been huge reservoirs of energy bubbling away somewhere just below the surface over the last few years, waiting for a chance to see the light of day. Waiting until now, this night when that opportunity presented itself at last, and when suddenly a massive scene was bursting to the surface fully-formed. Rivers of freaks spewing forth like lava from a volcano.

There were people dressed like freaks and semi-freaks and even straights as far as the eye could see. Everyone Gabriel had ever seen around that old waterfront neighborhood over the last month, along with so many new faces that he couldn't believe it. So many that the familiar faces seemed to have become lost in a sea of new ones. And all of them were making their way toward the Starry Night—the Stony Night as many of them had taken to calling it. They were all heading for what used to be the entrance to Jacobs' bar. The one which he himself had personally shut down, don't forget about that, Gabriel told himself as he recalled the incident. Shut it down almost singlehanded. And as he watched the people filing inside, he wondered just how many among them had any idea of who he was and what he had done. How many were in for a surprise when the tale of his exploits was recounted up on stage.

Once inside the concert hall Gabriel was nearly overwhelmed, all those people crowded together and the decorations and the light show. It was almost more than he could take. And as he hung around on the edge of that sea of confusion, he searched for someone to guide him to the place where he as guest of honor would watch the event and where he would receive his ovation. As he looked around, though, the familiar faces were few and far between, while even when he finally spotted some guy that he recognized as being from the Hash House, the guy seemed to ignore him when he called out and asked where to go. Glancing over for a second before going back to whatever it was that he had been doing and acting as though he hadn't heard a thing.

Gabriel didn't do much better with the next Hash House type he encountered either, and it wasn't until he saw Dave making his way through the crowd a short time later that he finally found someone who was willing to stop for a second and acknowledge his existence. Dave who didn't do much more than that, though, as busy and distracted as he was at the time. And in fact, all he did was to smile fleetingly and give a quick hello before continuing on his way, off to deal with whatever more pressing issues there were for him to deal with at the time. So preoccupied with all those other things that no sooner had Gabriel seen the guy's reaction than he came to the conclusion that it was going to be up to him to fend for himself that night. Up to him to find his own vantage point from which to watch the concert and also from which to approach the stage when the big moment came and they called upon him.

As he began to seek out a good spot in the crowded hall, Gabriel came across one of his oldest and most faithful customers from The Bean-In, a somewhat older freak named Chris who came in for coffee or a bite to eat nearly every day. Though when Gabriel switched into the gracious-host mode which he always affected at work, when he went over to greet the guy with a big hug, he was surprised by the coldness of Chris's response. By the way he squirmed out of the embrace so quickly and the way that, from the tone of his hello, he was also saying goodbye at the same time. Making it clear that while he may have been a loyal customer of Gabriel's establishment, Chris was far from being a personal friend and that he had no desire to hang out with him at the concert.

After that quick rebuff Gabriel made no further attempts to link up with anyone else he knew, but instead he picked out a spot—any spot—and planted himself there within the midst of the crowd. Feeling strangely isolated now despite all the people who surrounded him, who bumped him and jostled him now and again. Speaking only in silence as he told them one and all, Just you wait till you hear what I did. Just you wait. Cause once you hear that, you're all gonna want to be my friends. Every one of you. You're all gonna want to talk to me and thank me and be with me. All of you.

And then even as the concert began at last, still Gabriel maintained his lonely vigil. His name never spoken, his exploits never explained as the opening speeches came to an end, and as electric music began to blare. Music which turned out to be far better than what he had been fearing considering the fact that the event's organizers had decided not to bring in any outside groups for that first concert of theirs, featuring instead a steady stream of local bands. Garage bands from the city and its suburbs which had only recently dropped their endless covers of *Satisfaction* and *House of the Rising Sun* and made the attempt to go psychedelic, either by doing what they could in the way of improvisation and guitar distortion or by playing bubblegum anthems to peace and love. Or perhaps by doing both those things during the course of their sets.

They weren't bad though. Not as good as the folk music, even the jazz that he would have preferred, but at least they were bearable. Most of them were. And the only things that Gabriel found truly unbearable that evening were the crowding in that over-packed hall and the long wait for his moment of recognition. Redemption. That moment when Hugh who got up to serve as announcer between acts would call him up to the stage for his speech or his ovation. Or at least when the guy would say something about him, mention his name. Though each time that Hugh got up to take a turn at the mic, he would finish his spiel without Gabriel's name ever having passed his lips. Group after group, Gabriel's hopes raised only to be dashed. His name

never uttered as a vague sense of foreboding seemed to grow more pronounced with each missed opportunity. Each surge of expectation, all for nothing. Each, Next time, maybe next time. Group after group getting up to play. Group after group...

I've been had!! he practically shouted at last. Because he could deny it no longer as the final group got up to take the stage, as Hugh walked off for the last time without the least reference to the supposed guest of honor. I've been fooled by that bunch of Hash House assholes again. Fooled into getting my hopes up only to have them come crashing down. Like always! Because all Dave's talk about my being the guest of honor? That was nothing but a lie! Nothing but a ruse to get me to show up at this concert where I could be ignored and humiliated by that bunch of jerk-offs one more time. That... Oh, I don't know what name there is bad enough to describe a bunch like that. Those self-serving hypocrites. Those... Those... Those glory-thieves!

For days after the concert Gabriel was left with a bad taste in his mouth, and he would feel something disagreeable rise up within him each time that he thought about it or the people behind it. And then even as the days passed and the bad taste slowly diminished, still he felt vaguely uncomfortable about the way things were going. He felt like there was something wrong, and not just on the personal level either. No, there was something wrong with the entire situation, the whole scene and the direction it was taking. Because for one thing it was growing way too fast, that much was obvious to him. It was letting far too many people join in, too many obvious phonies. And Gabriel couldn't understand why it was that when those pseudo-hippies would show up, there would always be so many people there to greet them with open arms. So many of those Hash Housers and their ilk, not to mention his own cousin. None of them showing the least discrimination in who they would accept as one of their own, as instead they seemed to accept everyone, no questions asked. With an openness and inclusiveness that went completely against the attitude of exclusiveness which he had learned back in his early days with the Beats. The old hipper-than-thou, the I'm-the-real-thing-and-you're-all-a-bunch-of-phonies. The type of attitude which had been found not only among the Beats but would also be found among every one of the counter-cultural movements that were to come along later, the Punks and all the rest. All those movements which had or still have at their hearts an attitude of rejection and exclusion. Because it was only the hippies who ever went the other way, only they who had an attitude of inclusion, of welcoming all comers and wanting to convert the whole world, one person after another after another until finally the entire planet had become one big hippie heaven.

That wasn't how Gabriel saw things, though, and he was certain that even though that openness of theirs may have been one of the main causes of the spectacular growth which the hippie movement had been enjoying during those early days, it was surely going to lead to a just-as-spectacular crash in the days or years to come. It had to. It was inevitable when you considered the fact that they were allowing the "hippie blood" to become so quickly and so widely diluted through their uncritical acceptance of anyone and everyone who wanted to join in. Gabriel could see it coming from miles away.

And speaking of blood, what was going on with that cousin of his these days? What had happened to that kid and his attitude? How was it that he had become so estranged from his uncle in so short a time? That kid who had practically worshipped him a little more than a month ago, but who now showed such indifference toward him. And as Gabriel thought about it, he asked himself when exactly those changes had first begun. Like had it been ever since the night they

busted Jacobs? That night when the kid had chosen to attend the victory party at the Hash House rather than returning to his home, his ship. Yes, that seemed to have been the turning point. Because ever since that day, the kid had been spending more and more time hanging out at the Hash House or the other hippie establishments which had sprung up nearby, and he was hardly ever to be seen around The Bean-In anymore. Barely even covering Mandy's days off as in fact on the last one, Gabriel had been forced to do the whole thing by himself for hours. Hours.

Like the kid was starting to abandon his uncle in the same way that Mandy was threatening to do. Mandy who despite her spacey ways was showing an unexpected resolve in her resistance to her boss's attempts to... you know... to exercise his prerogatives. And who had recently begun to talk about going off to join the Hash House collective.

To join forces with those people who had done so much to brainwash everyone in that city and turn them against him. Everyone! Or how else to explain the coldness of his reception on the night of the concert. The way that everyone he knew there had ignored him so completely. Even his cousin who never said a word, never looked his way as though trying to avoid him, as instead the kid had spent the entire evening hanging out with some young black guy that Gabriel couldn't remember ever having seen around the neighborhood before. Some new guy, some new friend, and one who the kid apparently preferred to his very own Uncle Gabriel.

So how could that be? Gabriel wanted to know. Where could the change have come from? he demanded to know one day when the kid paid one of his ever less frequent visits to The Bean-In. Why had he stopped hanging around with his good old uncle? Stopped helping him run his coffeehouse. Why? he insisted as he refused to let the kid wriggle out of the question with one of his usual unintelligible mumbles. Insisted instead upon a clear and concise explanation. Insisted upon...

"Those places are cooler than yours, Uncle Gabriel," the kid said at last in a tone of innocence, of utter sincerity. A tone that struck Gabriel like a dagger to the heart when he heard those simple words, heard at the same time all those things which had just been spoken between the lines. The, "Those guys are cooler than you." And the, "They're hip and you're not." And the, "You're nothing but an old loser."

But was he really all that bad? And was The Bean-In really so far out of touch with what was happening? He tried to tell himself that it wasn't so in spite of the overwhelming proof to the contrary. In spite of the fact that his clientele had not only shrunk significantly as more new places had opened up, but at the same time it seemed to have aged. Like for instance, he couldn't remember when was the last time that he had seen a young freak come in there to eat, only the older freaks still coming around with any sort of regularity. While on top of that, in what could perhaps be considered the final insult to his vision of hipness, a number of older Locals had actually started to come in and eat at The Bean-In from time to time. Totally unhip people who had apparently decided that his place wasn't really all that bad after all. Not when you considered all the other places which had sprung up around the neighborhood during that spring. All those hippie places.

PART II

NAMING

In which the mind identifies the object or action which has been perceived.

ENTER GABRIEL

Gabriel never liked his name, and he didn't much care for any of the nicknames or abbreviations that usually went with it. He liked them so little, in fact, that at the age of eight he made the decision to create a nickname of his very own. To undertake a task at which he spent the next several weeks trying out every variation of the name Gabriel that he could think of, some that he liked and some that he didn't, until finally one day he came up with something that sounded exactly right. Hip and modern and at the same time original, so that on the very next day he made the formal announcement to family and friends. Told them that from that moment on, his name was going to be Briel.

He picked that name in hopes that it would prove to be one-of-a-kind, a nickname which he would share with no one else. And perhaps the reason he felt so strong an urge to distinguish himself from others even at that early age had something to do with the fact that in many ways, he actually was one-of-a-kind. Because Briel grew up different, a member of the only black family in an otherwise all-white town on the west coast. Or more correctly, he was a member of the only mixed-race family in town, being part black and part white and part Cherokee and part who-knows-what, though as is always the case in American culture, the black was considered to be the dominant part. And so with the racial makeup of the town being such as it was, it meant that he was always the person who stood out in any crowd simply because of his appearance. The lone black face surrounded by white.

Not that the people in his hometown went out of their way to remind him of his race. No, far from it. For in spite of the racial composition of the town, it actually had a long and proud tradition of liberalism. One of those places in which people always made a conscious effort to act in a color-blind way, one where they would grow visibly uncomfortable whenever the subject of race was brought up in Briel's presence, immediately changing the subject and acting as though that were something that decent people didn't discuss. With a denial so universal, an avoidance of the subject so widespread, that it can hardly be surprising that Briel grew up in near total ignorance of his own racial identity. Grew up not knowing whether he was white or black or what. And there were times when he would be so oblivious to the color of his skin that it would come as a shock when he happened to see himself in a mirror. A shock to see someone who looked so different from everyone else he saw around town.

He would sometimes be reminded of his race in cruder ways thanks to the comments made by members of the local white trash, though even they tended to pull their punches somewhat, the ideal of liberal tolerance as deeply engrained in the consciousness of that town as it was. So that while they might talk about his mother, call her a slut or a traitor to her race for

having married a black man, or while they might go after Briel or one of his siblings, they would generally use words like coon or jungle bunny while avoiding any stronger epithets. And then even as weak as those insults may have been, still they would immediately be shouted down by any more liberal white person who happened to be present. Harsher terms challenged so aggressively that Briel never learned what it could mean to be called a nigger right to his face, having heard the word mainly in passing and never in reference to himself without having some white person come leaping to his defense. Or at least he never heard himself being called a nigger in an open and unapologetic way until he was in the army.

The decision to join the army straight out of high school was his own, one which he made despite his parents' disapproval. Because as he looked ahead from that point in his life, he couldn't stand the idea of four more years of boredom and monotony. Four more years of school. Not when there was a whole world out there just waiting to be seen, a world of adventure and romance. And whenever he thought about the possibilities for adventure during his senior year, the first thing to pop into his head—the head of a naïve young kid from a small town—would always be the rapidly escalating war in Vietnam. The greatest adventure of the day, it seemed at the time. A place of action and excitement and heroism, a place to grow up and to prove himself as a man.

It took him a long time to convince his parents that he would be doing the right thing by joining the army, however. Arguing about it for weeks and months and threatening to sign up with or without their approval. Though even with all that, it wasn't until he played the G. I. Bill card on them that he ever managed to bring them around. Telling them that once his enlistment was up, he would be able to pay his own way through college—and to pay it at the college of his choice, not at one of the few places that they were able to afford—so that in that way he would actually be seizing an opportunity by joining up, not discarding one. He would be opening the doors of his future that much wider.

And so in the end Briel went into the service when he left school. He went in with his hopes high, expecting not only excitement but also an opportunity to learn and to grow. An opportunity to become a man, a real man. Though as is so often the case with youthful dreams, the reality of what he encountered once he got in turned out to be far different from the illusions which had drawn him to the army in the first place. It turned out to be a disaster, in fact, an experience which left him even more lost and confused than what he had been before. Not that he had known a whole lot about himself before he went in. No, he hadn't had a clue as to who or what he was, though at least none of that had mattered to him beforehand. His race hadn't been something that he had felt compelled to deal with or to clarify as he had simply been different, that was all. He had been an exotic, the only black kid in town.

But then once he got into the army, what he found was that rather than being different, he had suddenly become a member of a group, one of the many blacks to be seen around there. And while he may have found the presence of so many black faces to be highly refreshing at first, it didn't take long for him to realize just how little he had in common with any of them other than their shared skin color. Their backgrounds, their personal experiences so different from his own that he could hardly relate to them at all. Feeling an awkwardness in their presence which was clearly mutual as most of them seemed to treat him like he was some sort of light-hued oddball, a man whose blackness was barely skin-deep. And then when it came to the whites in his unit,

their attitudes toward race were so different from anything that Briel had experienced while growing up that he didn't know what to make of it. Unable to understand why they refused to recognize the validity of his white half and instead treated him like he was nothing more than one of "them." One more black guy. One more...

It surprised him early on when he overheard certain white members of the training unit referring to the black members as niggers, though it didn't shock him. Not really. No, the shock didn't come until sometime later on, until one day when he was standing around innocently, listening to some of those white guys as they talked, only for the worst racist in the entire outfit to turn and yell all at once, "What the fuck you lookin' at, nigger?" Because that word! That horrible word. And to hear it being aimed at him in a tone like that. It sent a shockwave running through Briel's body like nothing he had felt before. A jolt so fierce that it staggered him, left him too stunned to speak. His only reply a frozen stare with mouth agape until finally the guy dismissed him with a, "Dumb ass nigger!" before continuing on with his conversation. Continuing on as though nothing of importance had just happened.

Nothing of importance for him perhaps, though for Briel something of gigantic proportions had occurred at that moment. Something that would change him forever, make it impossible for him ever to look at a white person in the same way again. Those people whose skin color was the same as that guy. Collins! That asshole. That racist scum. That ignorant piece of southern trash.

Because Briel hated Collins at that moment, hated him with a passion. And at the same time he hated himself for not having put up some kind of defense, not having stood up to the guy and told him to fuck off. His self-disgust so intense that over the next few days, he couldn't stop replaying that scene in his head again and again. Repeating it so many times that by the next time Collins dared to call him a nigger, he was more than ready to respond. Ready to stand up for himself and strike back with insults of his own. Insults which he delivered with such fire, such passion that upon hearing them not only was Collins left dumbstruck, but at the same time the entire unit became instantly polarized around the two of them. Split into two distinct factions, with the blacks and other minorities and the so-called progressive whites backing Briel while the regressive whites backed Collins. And the split within the unit which began on that day grew nothing but wider with the passage of time, grew until members of one faction would hardly speak to members of the other. Grew until they were in a state of near civil war. In a daily war of nerves that would only come to an end when training finally ended and the unit was broken up, the members shipped off to various destinations in Vietnam where they were to serve as replacements. Brand new cannon-fodder.

Briel was shipped off by himself, off to an outfit where he knew no one and no one knew about him or his past so that he was able to make a clean start of it. And having learned his lesson back in training camp about the problems that can come from making yourself into the center of controversy, he did his best to keep his mouth shut in that new unit. He didn't get involved in futile arguments with the company's racists, those arguments which he realized by then could never be won, and instead he tried to ignore them whenever he could. But while his mouth may have been closed during those months he spent in country, his eyes were wide open and his mind in high gear. Watching everything that was going on around him and trying to find the explanations, the answers to the Great Why. Like for instance, why were there so many

ignorant, racist people in the world? Why couldn't they see the truth of their shared humanity? And then what about the other big news item in that part of the world where he was? What about that huge chaos of pointless aggression within which he had suddenly found himself immersed? That so-called war.

It wasn't that Briel had been sent to a particularly dangerous part of Vietnam, the base where he was stationed being simply one of many. Not the safest place in the war zone but hardly the most dangerous either, as instead it was a place of endless patrols and generally fruitless attempts at setting ambushes. One where the extended periods of calm were only interrupted from time to time by short, sharp periods of combat, so that to Briel the principle enemy soon proved to be the boredom. The monotony and the thoughts it produced as those long, tedious days and weeks of routine duties crept ever so slowly by, and as the questions seemed to press ever more insistently upon his mind: What was it all about? Why were they involved in a war which even at that early stage already appeared so pointless? Because as Briel looked around him, nothing that he saw made the least bit of sense. Not the country and not the people and not their objectives, if they had any. If they had some reason for being there in the first place, fighting and killing and risking their lives.

And so Briel asked himself over and over again: What are we doing here? Why don't we just go home? Asked himself, though he shared his thoughts with no one else. No one but Joe, that is, the one and only true friend that he ever made in the army. Josurf as Briel renamed him, a laid-back California dude who, while he may not have been a surfer, Briel always felt that he should have been one. Because Joe had it all going for him, the looks and the build, while the only thing he lacked was the surfboard.

On top of which he was such a great guy that Briel soon grew to love him in a way that men are seldom loved. In a way that made them brothers, more than brothers. Soul-mates, inseparable. With a connection so deep that it was almost like they were the same person, separated only by the fact that they inhabited two different bodies. Because in every other way they were completely complimentary to one another, each of them completing the other somehow. Joe with his happy-go-lucky attitude and his outgoing personality which fit in perfectly with Briel's quiet, serious nature. Joe the friend to all, even to the rednecks and racists in the unit, who found his perfect match in the guarded and often suspicious Briel. In a person who held his thoughts and feelings closely in check, revealing them to no one but those he trusted while trusting no one. No one but Joe.

The connection so close that the two of them would talk for hours on end during the many dull and repetitious days that they spent together on base. With Joe evidently loving the fact that he had finally found someone with whom he could discuss serious topics, while Briel loved the fact that he had finally found someone who wasn't either a phony or hostile or weird. Someone who was really and truly color-blind. Someone who treated him like a human being and nothing more, spoke straight from the heart and acted just as authentically. And someone around whom he could open up in a way that he had never opened to anyone before. Share his innermost feelings, his doubts, his fears, and become himself. Truly himself for the first time ever as the love he came to feel for that man grew deeper by the day.

Grew to such depths, the sense of caring so profound and so abiding that it felt like his guts, his heart, his very life were being ripped right out of him on that day when he saw Joe get hit in a fire-fight. Like a big part of himself died right there as he saw his friend go down, hit so hard. Hit in a way that made it clear that Joe would never be able to walk again, if he survived the wound at all. Clear that his life was as good as over, that the magnificent Josurf was never going to get his chance to ride that surfboard. Never do anything worthwhile again as instead he would be spending the rest of his life in a wheelchair—or worse. Because all at once Joe had been reduced to nothing, less than nothing. That wonderful young man, that beautiful physical specimen had suddenly been reduced to a cripple.

And the sight of such terrible human waste, of his best friend's life being destroyed in such a senseless way, hit Briel with a force that he never would have imagined possible. A force that made that day when Collins first called him a nigger seem like nothing, like a mere blip on the screen. It hit him with a force that left him drained, without the will or the desire to go on. Lost and helpless as he continued to live from nothing more than sheer inertia. Because he was nobody anymore, not without Joe he wasn't. He was nobody and nothing, a shadow rather than a man.

As the days and weeks wore on after that, as he tried to come to terms with the horror of what had happened on that day, the only thing that Briel felt capable of doing was retreating. Drawing up within himself and drawing away from everyone and everything else. Because he couldn't fight whoever was to blame for that idiotic war, not then he couldn't. If ever. And he refused to blot out his mind with booze or, like a few members of his unit were already starting to do, with drugs. So that the only thing left for him to do was to withdraw, to turn so far inward as to make himself into a complete loner, a person with no desire to see or hear from any other human being again. And certainly no desire to go out and try to make new friends to replace the one he had lost, as from that point on he spent all his free time alone, thinking or reading or just vegetating. Spent his time searching out the types of books that would feed his sense of isolation and his quiet one-man rebellion against the army. Radical books, anti-war books and books about social issues. Especially books about the problems of racism.

And in fact, Briel spent so much time lost in his thoughts during those final months in Vietnam, thinking about so many different things, so many problems and so many solutions, that in the end his mind seemed to have become completely clogged with them. Filled with so many ideas as to cancel each other out. So many that when his tour finally ended and he returned to the world, returned to his life soon afterward thanks to an early discharge, it was only to find that he had no idea what he wanted to do with himself. No idea where to go or what to do, as the only thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't go home again, not after all the changes he had been through. Not when he had ceased to be the person he had once been, the person who had left that town to join the army those many years ago. Those centuries.

The only thing Briel knew was that he wanted to "find himself" as the expression goes, wanted to figure out who and what he really was. Like was he black or was he white or was he something in between? Was his internal color of some completely different hue? He felt a great urge to find an answer to those questions, and as he thought about a place in which to begin the search, he soon came up with the idea of going back. Back to slave country, back to the place where his people were once held in bondage, or at least where a part of his people were once

held by another part of his people and where at an even earlier date yet another part of his people once roamed free. He decided to go look for a college back on the east coast, somewhere below the Mason-Dixon Line perhaps, and maybe even somewhere within striking distance of Cherokee country. Somewhere in the vicinity of where his roots must lay, his twisted and intersecting and confusing roots.

And so in the end Briel enrolled in a college that seemed to fill his requirements. Enrolled and tried to fit in, though almost immediately he found himself faced with the same dilemma that he had faced in the army. Because he found that it was impossible for him to relate to the black people that he met at college, found that he fit in even less well with the black students than what he had with the black guys in the army. All those spoiled middle-class kids who had never had to struggle in their lives, they seemed to him as he immediately felt turned off by them. By their privileged status and their big talk about their fight against racism and all the rest—and especially by their personal attacks on him for not being “black enough”—so that it didn’t take long to decide that they weren’t the people for him. And since he made an effort to avoid contact with other veterans at all costs, to avoid those guys who would only dredge up memories that he was doing his best to suppress, Briel finally found himself falling in with whoever happened to come along.

With a group of white students as it turned out to be, a group of typical middle-class white kids with some of whom he shared a class or two. It was a group of guys centered around a big old house that they were renting together, and since Briel quickly rose to celebrity status within that circle of friends, it wasn’t long before they were offering to let him move in and have one of the rooms. Because with the group consisting of a bunch of those liberal/progressive types who were going hippie in droves in the nation’s colleges and universities in those days—or at least going semi-hippie—Briel was the exact sort of person they would come to admire. Even those among them who came from such conservative parts of the country that for them the idea of associating with a black man was something new and revolutionary, something that would have been unthinkable just a few years before. But in Briel there was a lot for them to look up to, that man who was so much more mature than any of them. That man who had been to Vietnam and who, while he may not have talked about it, had clearly done the sorts of things that only real men ever do. On top of which the guy came from the west coast, that exotic land where the real hippies were. So that for those kids, everything about Briel, everything that he said and everything that he did seemed to be the very embodiment of hipness. A model for the rest of them to follow. And while they clearly liked the fact that he was black at a time when blackness was in, this being the first time that an entire generation of white kids had ever tried to “go black” in more ways than by simply imitating the music, they also seemed to like the fact that he wasn’t too black. The fact that he talked and acted so white.

As far as Briel’s attitude toward the group was concerned, he thought that they were okay. A good-hearted bunch, most of them, and there were even a few in the group that he might have liked, truly liked, might have related to a bit. Nothing like the way he had related to Joe, of course, because the truth is that while he may have been among them in those days, he was never one of them. He always remained somehow apart from the rest even in their most intimate shared moments, a visitor to that group no matter how much time he spent with them. Always aloof and always keeping to himself. Not in the way that he had stood apart in the army perhaps, not through physical isolation, but rather through emotional isolation, through never revealing the

things that he really thought and felt to that group of kids. Because he didn't have the confidence in them that it would have taken for him to do so, the confidence in them or the confidence in himself, as instead he erected and maintained a barrier of cool between himself and the group. A barrier of calm self-composure which the kids soon came to admire as the very model of hipness and detachment. Came to admire it while some of them even tried to imitate it.

But how could Briel have done anything else? How could he have thrust the things that he had been through in Vietnam upon that bunch of innocent kids? And even more importantly, how could he reveal anything about the emotions that churned within him after the great tragedy that took place that spring? The death of Martin Luther King. How could he talk about something like that with a bunch of white kids? A bunch of kids who had no idea what it meant to be a black man in those tumultuous days. Even one like Briel who in so many ways was only nominally black.

Because with the death of Dr. King, suddenly all bets were off. The days of go-along and get-along were over, the days of black-and-white-together. Those days were gone forever, it seemed, as words like tolerance and moderation completely disappeared from the vocabularies of black people during that spring. Words like non-violence. They had died right along with their greatest advocate, Dr. King, and now it was the extremists who held the floor. Now it was the radicals, those people who were convinced that blacks and whites could never live together in peace. Because it was they who held the black population's ear during that spring, they who set the agenda. And as they insisted ever more shrilly that blacks should have nothing whatsoever to do with whites, it was becoming harder and harder for any black person to ignore them.

And so Briel's sense of confusion was at a peak as that spring wore on, a peak that seemed to grow higher with each passing day. Because he couldn't hang out with other blacks, not when he didn't feel like he was one of them, not deep inside, while at the same time he couldn't in good conscience hang out with whites if that made him a traitor to his black skin as the radicals on campus never ceased to remind him. But if he couldn't do either of those things, then what could he do? What could he possibly do? Could he try to go black? Turn against what he felt to be his true nature and make himself into something that he wasn't. Or would he just have to live with the guilt? The sense of betrayal to his race which he could never discuss with his white friends, never even mention it around them since they would have no idea what he was talking about. The sense of guilt which he could never let out even as it ate away at him, ate away deep inside.

It was only from time to time that Briel ever managed to mask that guilt from himself. During brief moments while having sex with those women who seemed to flock to him in droves though who meant nothing to him beyond a single night, the satisfaction of his immediate urges. Or perhaps during certain events like rock concerts, which was why he always went so far out of his way to attend as many as he could. To go to those shows during which the pounding of the drums and the screaming of the guitars would sometimes manage to creep inside and shut down his own thoughts for a time, to overwhelm his unease through sheer volume. And he especially liked going to concerts in the big city nearby, the ones held at an old ballroom that everyone called the Stony Night. He liked them so much that he would go there as often as he could, whenever there were big-name bands playing, and he even went there one night when the concert consisted of nothing but local bands, nothing but a bunch of suburban garage bands.

The music wasn't bad that night, though, not bad at all. Considering. With some of the bands even displaying a certain amount of talent, some of them good though nothing special. Not as special as the night turned out to be in a whole different way.

Briel went there by himself, none of the kids he knew from college showing much interest in attending. And as he stood among the crowd in that renovated old hall, he did his usual thing, grooving to the music while it played and then chatting and joking with those around him during the pauses. Trying to drag out the music-high for as long as he could. And as usual, the people around him responded with their own vague and vacuous observations, uttering the usual meaningless phrases. All of them but one guy, that is, a guy whose responses to Briel's comments somehow struck a chord. Not that the guy said anything original or insightful though. No, what struck Briel about his words was the way that they sounded so *real*, so authentic and so straight-from-the-heart, without pretense and with none of that air of hesitation and cautious imitation that "progressive" whites so often display when talking with blacks. Because in this guy there was no phoniness and no hidden discomfort, as instead the things he said seemed to show exactly what he was thinking and feeling. And perhaps it was that air of quiet honesty that drew such an immediate emotional response from Briel, such a sense not of love but rather of like-at-first-sight. A sense of an almost chemical bonding.

The guy in question was a big kid, tall and a bit on the scrawny side, though he was bound to fill out in time since from the looks of him, he couldn't have been more than 18 or 19. 20 tops. He was a good-looking, soft-spoken kid, open and outgoing but shy at the same time. And Briel felt himself being drawn so irresistibly toward the kid that soon he was speaking to no one else between songs, soon he was ignoring the presence of everyone at that concert besides... What was his name? Just as Briel was about to ask, suddenly he changed his mind and said instead, "Ya know what? You remind me so much of Gary Cooper that I'm just gonna call ya Gary. So that's gonna be your name from now on, okay? Gary."

"Oh really? How'd ya guess?" the kid answered in a tone without guile.

"Ya mean it really is? Your name really is Gary?"

"It is now," the kid said. And with that, the two of them burst into laughter. Oh, you had to love someone with an attitude like that.

And the attraction seemed to be mutual, with Gary just as drawn to Briel as the other way around. Just as starved for real human contact and just as elated at finally having found someone with whom he could relate on a meaningful level. Someone who might turn out to be more than a mere passing acquaintance.

And so as the concert wore on, it wasn't long before the two of them were not only speaking with no one but each other, but they were actually beginning to create their own private little world right there in the midst of the crowd. A world which none but they could share as within that little two-man world of theirs they spoke openly, holding nothing back. Or at least Gary seemed to hold nothing back, speaking in that open and unaffected way which, as Briel was soon to learn, is the way that seamen generally do when speaking among themselves. Because in fact Gary turned out to be a seaman. A guy who had come there aboard an old ship which had

been laid-up in that port for the last month or so, and who had been hanging around the city ever since, waiting for the ship to break back out. And as he discussed his nautical past and described his present predicament, he seemed to make it a point to tell Briel a few of his best sea stories, the tales of his adventures in what had so far been a short life at sea.

Gary was almost naively open-hearted in the way that he talked about his thoughts and feelings, and his attitude soon proved to be so contagious that it wasn't long before Briel was revealing things about himself as well. Talking about things which he had never discussed with anyone before, or at least no one since Joe. Not the painful things perhaps, not those awful things from his days in Vietnam, but still they were things that he had been carrying around with him for a long, long time. And as he began to unload a few of those charged memories onto this kid, Gary, it felt so wonderful, so liberating and so cleansing, that he couldn't get enough of it, and he wanted it to go on and on. Forever perhaps. He wanted to release more and more and more.

By the time the concert was over and the two of them had to file outside, they had both become so engrossed in their conversation that rather than say their goodbyes, they came to a halt once they reached the sidewalk outside, stood and talked together beneath the glare of the streetlights as the rest of the crowd filed past. And they were still talking in that way as the last of the stragglers left and the street became nearly deserted, standing alone in the urban night with no musical interludes to interrupt the flow of their thoughts and nothing to prevent them from delving into ever deeper levels of themselves. Nothing to prevent them from talking about the ever more personal, about their dreams and such, their illusions.

Standing on that sidewalk outside the Stony Night for who knew how long, for minutes that seemed to shoot by like seconds, hours that passed like minutes, as all the while a certain side-thought slowly but surely worked its way into Briel's consciousness. The thought of finding a comfortable place for the two of them to go where they could sit down and relax while they continued their discussion. So that when a lull appeared in the conversation at last... "Hey, I tell ya what. I'd invite ya to come over to my place to talk, but trouble is that I live a long ways off. Like in a whole other town," he began, pausing to give Gary a chance to invite him over to his own place. Though when the guy failed to take the suggestion, finally Briel was forced to come right out and ask, "So what about your place?"

"My place? What, didn't I tell ya that I'm just...? Like all I'm doin' is I'm crashin' on the ship."

"On the ship?"

"Yeah, over at that dock where it's laid-up. Cause like the guards know me and they let me go on board to sleep."

"And ya can't...? They won't let ya have visitors?"

"Visitors!?" Gary responded with a laugh. "Man, I don't got nothin' on that ship, cause it's laid-up, ya know. So like there's no lights or nothin', and I can't even take a pee on board cause the toilets aren't workin'. So all I do is I sleep there."

"In the dark?"

“Yeah, in the dark. With nothin’. No air, no water. Nothin’!”

“Wow, that’s uh... That’s really roughin’ it, huh?” Briel was impressed in a certain way, while at the same time he was suddenly curious. “So where do ya go in the daytime to like... You know.”

“Oh, I got this uncle who’s got a place around here. Like he owns it and he runs it and stuff. This place called The Bean-In.”

“The Bean-In...?” The name didn’t ring a bell with Briel.

“It’s a few blocks over that way,” Gary pointed. “It’s this coffeehouse he has. Kind of a hippie place.”

“A hippie place? You? I didn’t think...” Briel laughed slightly as he spoke, his quiet contempt for hippies showing through. But then he quickly checked himself, not wanting to say anything that might offend his new-found friend.

“Oh, it’s not me. It’s my uncle. He’s the hippie, I guess ya could say.”

“And he’s like... He’s got a place around here?”

“Yeah, right over there,” Gary pointed again.

“And he’s into all that...” Briel hesitated, unable to decipher his friend’s reaction so far to their talk about hippies. “Like he was into all that Summer of Love stuff last year?”

“Last year and this year, too, cause he says that every summer is a Summer-a Love from here on out.”

“Every summer?”

“That’s what he says...” Gary didn’t sound very convinced.

“And whatta you say?” Briel asked as mildly as he could.

“Me? I don’t know...”

“Cause I tell ya man, the Summer of Love is over with. It’s dead and gone,” Briel said all at once, pulling out the stops though he knew not why. What it was about the tone of his new friend’s voice, so open and accepting, that practically impelled him to let loose. To come out and say exactly what he thought no matter what the consequences.

“Yeah...?”

“Yeah man. Cause like look at this place. Look at this neighborhood. Do ya see any love around here anymore?” Briel paused momentarily before going on to answer the question himself. “No man! All ya see around here now-days is junkies and tourists. A bunch-a weekend hippies. That’s all there is left around here. Ya don’t see any real hippies anymore.”

“No...?”

“No man. They all left. They all went to the country or they disappeared or somethin’. I don’t know where they went to. All I know is that they got the hell outa town. Cause that stuff is over with, man. And it’s like... They lost, man. The hippies lost!” Briel added this last in spite of the fact that he knew it to be untrue. Knew that while the original hippies may have disappeared quickly, there were now hippies showing up to replace them everywhere you looked, places like that college town of his, the very house in which he lived. But still he said it anyway because... Well, because it felt so damned satisfying to say it, that was why.

“I don’t know. I guess maybe...” Gary mumbled, a lost-sheep look appearing on his face.

Seeing that look, Briel knew that he had gone too far, and so pivoting quickly he tried to shift gears. “But do ya know what’s goin’ on right now? Do ya know what this summer is gonna be all about?” he asked, his eyes on Gary’s face, watching the reaction. “It’s the Summer of the Revolution, man! That’s what it is. Cause that’s what’s goin’ on this year. The Revolution.”

Briel wasn’t a political person, and he didn’t consider himself to be a revolutionary, but still there was something about saying that word. Revolution! There was a sort of mild adrenaline rush that came with it each time. Enough to make him want to go on with the subject. “This is the summer for fightin’ in the streets, man. It’s not the summer for hangin’ around smokin’ dope and sayin’ stupid stuff. Cause like look at what’s been happenin’ in Berkeley and like... everywhere, man. Cause people are marchin’ in the streets and they’re not gonna take it anymore, and like... I mean, just look at the march on the Pentagon last fall. Cause that’s what this summer is gonna be all about. Revolution, man. The Revolution!”

Gary’s face showed little response to his friend’s pronouncements, little beyond a vague look of expectation as though waiting to hear more. But then in spite of that encouraging look, still Briel hesitated as the subject of the black community’s reaction to the death of Dr. King came next to mind, a subject which he wanted to avoid at all cost. And it took him a moment before he was able to resume his harangue. “Like have ya seen what’s goin’ on in Paris right now?”

“Yeah, kinda...” Gary mumbled, evidently trying not to admit that he had no idea what Briel was talking about.

“I mean, look at it man! The barricades are in the streets. Right now! Right as we speak. They’re fighting in the streets of Paris. And if that’s not a revolution, then I don’t know what the hell it is.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah man, it’s the real thing. And it’s what’s gonna be happenin’ around here, too. There’s gonna be fighting in the streets right here this summer. There’s gonna be a revolution!” Briel had no idea why he would be getting so carried away with the subject, he who could care less about what was happening in Paris. Though there was something about this revolutionary rant that he was on, something so emotionally gratifying or so... He didn’t know what. And he also didn’t know why it was that his rant would now lead him into such a sudden and gratuitous

attack upon his friend. “And here you are hangin’ out with a bunch-a hippies,” he blurted out. Until instantly regretting what he had said, he tried with his next words to soften the blow. “Or at least hangin’ out with that hippie uncle-a yours.”

“If he’s even my uncle,” Gary shot back quickly, defending himself for the first time, it seemed, or perhaps simply trying to change the subject.

“If he’s what?”

“If he’s my uncle,” Gary said. And the next thing Briel knew, his friend was taking over the conversation and talking about his family, his sorry excuse for a family, it soon proved to be. Fourth and fifth marriages and out-of-wedlock births and step-relations as far as the eye could see. Telling a story which grew especially complex when he got onto the subject of that so-called uncle and his branch of the family tree, a branch so broken and disorganized as to cast doubt upon even the most basic relationships contained within it, let alone the more distant ones like that between Gary and his uncle. That guy who his father had always referred to as his uncle, in any case, though when Gary had shown up in town a month before and said hello, what he had found was that his uncle called him Cousin. Just that, just Cousin, with no name attached. Which meant that either his father had been wrong all along or else his so-called uncle had no clearer idea of how they were related than did anyone else.

Briel’s revolutionary ardor died out quickly as he listened to his friend speak, and the longer the kid went on with that pathetic story of his, the more he found his thoughts turning toward compassion and understanding, toward a realization of what it was that he liked so much about this guy. The realization that in Gary he had finally found someone who was even more lost and confused than he was himself. A seaman stuck on land and living aboard a laid-up ship, hanging around with a bunch of hippies—or at least with a hippie “uncle” who had no idea that his day was already over, that the world he had tried to create the year before had been a failure and that there was nothing left of it now but filth and decay. That all the hippies with any sense had given up and gone away—to the country most of them—and that only the losers remained behind. Only the people who just didn’t get it, the people like Gary’s uncle, and like poor Gary himself, that kid who had nowhere else to go.

As the time approached for Briel to hit the road, he thought about inviting Gary to come along and stay with him at his place in the college town where he lived. He thought about it, though when the moment of truth arrived, for some reason he couldn’t do it. Couldn’t bring himself to say the words despite the look of expectation which appeared on the kid’s face at the first mention of his going. He couldn’t say it because... Oh, he didn’t know why not. Why he felt the need to pull back right then and cut off that friendship which had so rapidly become so deep, so all-absorbing. He didn’t know why he felt the need to end it all and return instead to his lonely life. His solitude, his isolation, alienation.

CRIME AND GETAWAY

Briel returned to the city a few days later on a day when he had no classes. And while the excuse he gave for going was that he wanted to buy tickets for a concert that would be coming

up in a few days—a concert so highly anticipated by the guys he knew at college that he found himself with a whole carload of passengers—a truer reason for his decision was that he wanted to see Gary again. He wanted to see that kid who had made such a lasting impression upon him, and he wanted more of that deep, intimate contact which the two of them had shared. And so telling the guys who came with him that they might be in town for some time, he immediately wandered off in search of his friend.

He walked in the direction that Gary had indicated the day before, soon coming upon a rather nondescript looking place which contained only one hippie element: a psychedelic sign hanging above the door. “The Bean-In,” Briel read as he went up to peer through the window. Though failing to catch sight of his friend from there, soon he was stepping through the door to take a look inside, to glance about in all directions only to fail once again to discover any sign of the guy. Any sign of a proprietor, either—Gary’s uncle—as all Briel saw in the way of staff was a good-looking young hippie waitress. No hippie-looking men anywhere, though there might have been someone just disappearing through the door into the kitchen as he entered. He wasn’t sure. Because instead as his eyes wandered over the few customers seated about, what he saw was a bunch of people who had nothing hippie about them at all. A typical bunch of old-timers hanging around in what could have passed for a typical old-time neighborhood restaurant were it not for the one feature—other than the waitress—that didn’t fit in with that picture: a strange-looking mural which someone had painted on one of the walls. A painting which contained such a mixture of cheap abstraction and low-grade psychedelia that Briel could only gape in disbelief. At the silliness of the concept, at the horrendous quality of the execution.

Not finding his friend at The Bean-In, Briel was soon out the door and making his way down Hippie Row, stopping in at each store along the street to take a look around. Searching for that big sea-going kid among a clientele which appeared to consist mainly of college and high school kids and other soft-core hippies, unlike the various proprietors who at least made an effort to look like the “real thing.” And it wasn’t until after he had been through every establishment on the street and then started on his way toward the gate to the docks where his friend’s ship was tied up that he finally came across the object of his search. Gary walking down the street in a direction that led away from Hippieville.

Briel called out and ran to catch up the moment he caught sight of the guy. And then after an exchange of greetings, warm greetings, Gary offered a quick explanation of where exactly he was going. “They say they’re breakin’ the ship back out, so I gotta go down to the union hall and clear.”

“Down to the...?” Briel didn’t understand what he was talking about. “So you sail today? You gotta go and...?”

“No, the job starts tomorrow, but I gotta go clear the hall today. I gotta go reclaim my job.”

“Oh, I see. So that means you’re still free today?” Briel asked, his sense of relief showing in his voice.

“Yeah, I just gotta go by the hall for a couple-a minutes and then I got nothin’ else to do till tomorrow,” Gary explained, his own sense of anticipation showing just as clearly.

“So... where’re ya goin’? On the ship I mean.”

“Goin’? Where’re we goin’? Where’re we...? Nam,” Gary muttered softly at last, as though in fear of his friend’s reaction.

That reaction which was swift in coming. “Nam!? Vietnam!?” Briel practically shouted it out. “You say you’re goin’ to Vietnam!?” His offended tone asking at the same time, So why the hell didn’t you tell me this before?

“Yeah...” Gary responded sheepishly.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are ya goin’ there? Don’t ya know what’s goin’ on over there?” Briel asked. Calmly now but insistently. And when Gary’s only reply was to hang his head and stare at the ground, soon he went on with his interrogation despite his friend’s obvious discomfort. “So you’ve gotta go there? Is that it?”

“That’s where the ship’s goin’,” Gary said meekly, his eyes avoiding Briel’s even as he raised his head a bit.

“And you’ve gotta go with it? Ya can’t like... Ya can’t get a transfer to another ship or somethin’?”

“Oh, it’s not like ya ask for a transfer or nothin’ like that.”

“No? Then whatta ya do?”

“Ya just...” Gary paused and dropped his head once again as though he regretted having brought up the subject. “Like either ya take the job or ya don’t. That’s all... Or else ya quit.”

“And what, ya can’t quit now?”

“Quit? No. Cause like... I don’t even have the job yet. Not till I clear the hall.”

“Ya don’t have the job yet!? And you’re talkin’ like ya have to go there? Like ya got no choice in the matter!?” Briel could hardly believe what he had just heard. And so he pressed on, demanding an explanation.

He asked question after unanswered question, pushed and probed until finally Gary dared to look up all the way up for the first time. Dared to look him straight in the eye as he said in all innocence, “It’s my ship.” Just that and nothing more. As though that one short phrase were the explanation for everything, the summary of his entire line of reasoning.

Briel fell silent when he heard those words, and he stared at his friend for a long moment trying to digest them, trying to make sense of them. Turning them over and over in his head until at last he came to the realization that in fact the kid’s actions had nothing to do with his opinion

about the war, nothing to do with what he thought or felt about anything at all. Because rather than being a matter of choice or free will, it was obvious now that the kid was acting purely out of a sense of loyalty. Misplaced loyalty perhaps, but loyalty nonetheless. A sense that he owed something to that ship which had originally brought him there and aboard which he had been sleeping for the last month. A sense that he had to repay his debt to that ship by sailing away on it.

And as his friend's simple-minded thought processes became ever more clear in Briel's mind, he began to search for some way to counter them. Some way to answer their childlike logic with arguments and ideas which he knew instinctively would have to be just as simplistic. If not more so. "Ya know, ya don't have to go back if ya don't want to. Ya really don't. Ya don't have to sail on that ship."

"I don't have to...?" Gary repeated the phrase as though the idea had never occurred to him before, as though it were being presented for the very first time.

"No, ya can get a different ship goin' somewhere else, can't ya? Isn't that what ya just told me before?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"So ya could get one goin' to... I don't know. Where do the ships go?"

"All over," Gary said vaguely before tossing out as an after-thought, "But a lotta the guys like goin' to Vietnam cause-a the bonus ya get for goin' to the war zone."

"And that's what you want!? You want the bonus!?" Briel blew up at the sound of those words.

"No, not me. I don't care about none-a that stuff. I just..." Gary seemed unable to finish the thought.

"So why don't ya quit? Why don't ya go get another ship?"

"I don't know. It's just that..."

"What? What's wrong? Why can't ya get a different ship?"

"Cause like..." Gary mumbled as though struggling to form a coherent thought, until all at once he blurted out, "Cause I don't got a place to stay around here once the ship leaves."

"Ya don't have a place...?" Briel began. Until suddenly he, too, blurted out, "Ya can always stay with me, ya know. Ya can stay at my place if ya want to." Though no sooner had he spoken than he started to regret it.

As for Gary, though, he seemed to have no regrets whatsoever, his face lighting up the moment he heard those words. Like the little lost sheep that had finally found its flock. His joy

so transparent, so loudly trumpeted in his eyes that Briel knew immediately that there was no way he would ever be able to withdraw the offer, nothing to do now but to go through with it.

It wasn't long before the two of them got around to discussing the practical arrangements they would have to make before leaving town, things like Gary going back to the ship to gather up the gear he had stowed aboard, and like doing what he could to put his finances in order. And it was just as they were getting into the question of economics that suddenly Gary spoke up with a serious concern. "I don't got much money left," he began. "Like I can't hardly live for very long on what I got."

"Oh, what happened? Did ya already spend it all?"

"No, it's not that. Cause like some of it I went and sent to this bank back home where I got an account, and then with the rest of it, I like... Some of it I went and..."

"Ya what? What happened to it?"

"I... I loaned a bunch of it to my uncle," Gary finally spit it out.

"Your uncle? Ya mean the one who owns that place, that... The Bean-In?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Cause like he said that he'd pay me back later on. When the ship was sailin' or somethin'."

"When it was sailin'? Ya mean like right now?"

"Yeah, I guess..." the kid mumbled.

"So what's stoppin' ya then?" Briel pressed on, trying to help that poor, dumb kid put two and two together. "Cause all ya gotta do is go over there and collect it from him, right? All ya gotta do is tell him that the ship's sailin'—which it is—and that ya want your money."

"Yeah...?"

"Yeah, just tell him that ya want it. That's all. And tell him that ya want it now."

"Now...?"

"Yeah now. Right now!" Briel repeated himself and repeated again, speaking with greater firmness each time as he tried to get through to that well-meaning but dull-witted kid. Or at least that kid who was so terminally naïve as to appear dull-witted. Repeated himself one more time...

"Okay, I'll do it!" Gary said at last. Conviction in his voice as he spoke and conviction in his steps as he started off in the direction of his uncle's coffeehouse. Three steps, four steps, though it was only to pull up short as though suddenly struck by second thoughts. Moments of indecision after that as he looked here and there, took tentative steps this way and that, until finally he spoke again. "Ya know what? I better go get my stuff off-a the ship first."

With those words Gary was on his way for real, Briel following along as his friend took a shortcut through a broken section of the fence that enclosed the dock area before heading straight out into the middle of that waterside wasteland. Walking past half-collapsed warehouses and along the rotting docks of what had once been a working harbor while heading steadily in the direction of the only ship in sight, a rusty little freighter. One small enough to float in the shallow water of that long unused section of the port. They walked along, getting closer all the time, until just as they reached a point within a berth or so of the old freighter, Gary stopped and turned to his friend, told him that it would be best if he were to go no further. So that as Gary resumed his trek a moment later, he did so alone, leaving Briel with nothing to do but to stand and watch. To follow his young friend with his eyes as the guy jogged up the little gangway leading to the ship and waved to the guard who sat at the top before disappearing through a doorway, reappearing a short time later with a small seabag in his hand. A bag so small that it couldn't have contained more than a couple changes of clothing.

When Gary arrived back at the spot where Briel stood waiting, he growled out a low, determined, "Let's go do it!" as without the least change of pace, he continued on his way. Walking along with his head held high while taking long, purposeful strides that forced his friend to jog a bit in order to catch up and stay up with him as he led the way back out through that blighted post-industrial marinescape.

Back in the direction of The Bean-In, that place which had been his second home during his time in town, though also that place in which he had been used and taken advantage of, according to what Briel had been able to discern from the kid's artless tales about his experiences over the last month. Lied to and cheated by that uncle of his who had taken his money and his free labor and anything else he could get while offering nothing in return but a lot of empty promises.

But all that was about to change, Briel told himself as he saw his friend on his way to confront the guy and have it out at last. Ready to stand up like a man and demand his due and collect everything that he was owed. And as Briel watched his friend walk along with such firm resolve, such determination in his step, he felt a glow of confidence. A conviction that the guy was really going to pull it off.

As they began to draw nearer The Bean-In, though, Gary's pace seemed to slacken bit by bit, almost as though he were suffering from another attack of second thoughts. His stride growing less purposeful, more hesitant with each step he took until by the time the two of them rounded a corner and began to make their way down the final block of their journey, he had nearly come to a dead stop. Coaxed along only by the voice of his friend. "Come on, man. You can do it. Ya gotta do it."

And then as if the problems during their walk down that last block hadn't been bad enough, Gary seemed to freeze completely the moment they reached the door of the place. Incapable of continuing on, incapable of so much as reaching out to touch the handle. So that had it not been for Briel grabbing him by the arm and practically shoving him inside, taking the bag from his hand and then prodding him forward...

“Go ahead. You can do it,” Briel urged him on. “You can do it,” he said again and again. Until seeing that his gentle words were having no effect, finally he was forced to resort to harsher measures. “Listen! If you don’t go through with this thing, you can forget about comin’ with me. And you can forget about ever seein’ me again, too,” he said in a voice so hard, so compelling as to spur Gary into motion at last. To send him walking forward by himself, slowly and cautiously as though he dreaded what was about to happen. As though he would have given anything to be able to turn back.

Briel stayed by the door and watched as Gary made his way toward his uncle, toward that guy who must have been his uncle, though from the looks of him he couldn’t have been more than a half-generation older than his so-called nephew. He watched as Gary walked straight at him, that only man in the place who looked anything like a hippie, with a beard though with rather short hair, while as if trying to make up for the hair, the guy wore a stereotypical hippie shirt, big and flowery with baggy sleeves, along with a string or three of love beads hanging around his neck.

He watched as Gary shuffled forward at an ever decreasing pace like he was scared to death of ever reaching his destination, creeping along like he might turn tail at any moment, until finally he was there. Finally he came to a halt in front of his uncle and began to speak, his voice too low and too far away for Briel to hear what was being said, so that he had only the body language to go on. Only the sight of Gary speaking up for a moment and asking for his money in what must have been a very timid way, the sight of the uncle dismissing the whole thing out of hand. Telling him no without so much as a look in his direction and then walking off in what had to be one of the quickest and most ruthless brush-offs that Briel had ever witnessed.

As the uncle moved away, Gary turned to look back at his friend while making a gesture like, So what do I do now?

Go for it! Briel waved his hand in reply. Go ahead and try again, he waved a second time and a third, took a step forward for emphasis while insisting with his eyes. A fourth wave and a fifth before finally Gary shrugged his shoulders and started toward his uncle once again. Walked up and began to speak, though it was only for the guy to interrupt him before he’d had a chance to get in more than a couple of words. A second brush-off, though at least on this occasion the uncle took the time to look at his nephew for a moment before moving off.

Walking away and leaving the kid standing there alone as he turned to his friend for further advice. And as Briel started to wave once again. Go for it! Try again! He urged the big guy on. Keep trying! Don’t give up!

Until suddenly something seemed to change in the expression on Gary’s face, something new and strange seemed to come over it. Something that was hard for Briel to make out from as far away as he stood, though it must have been a look of... of anger perhaps, a look of... The look of someone who is tired of being pushed around, he thought. The look of someone who is ready to take a stand at last.

And as Gary approached his uncle for a third time, Briel could see that there was strength in the way that he moved. Firmness. See that the hesitation was gone all at once and that now his

friend was walking like he meant business, like this time he wasn't going to take no for an answer. So that when the uncle reacted to his latest approach with a clear physical threat, squaring off and raising his hands as though to hit the kid or to shove him aside, Gary suddenly squared off as well. He planted his feet in the spot where he stood and raised his fists, ready for combat. In a posture so aggressive that it sent a visible shudder running through the uncle's body, made the guy halt and pull back, evidently intimidated by that big kid who wasn't backing down anymore. That kid who was finally starting to act like a man and standing up to him. Finally calling his bluff.

I don't believe it! Briel practically rubbed his eyes as he watched the scene unfold. Saw the transformation which had taken place in his big friend over the last few seconds. With the shyness gone in a flash, it appeared, the timidity. And with Gary doing it all on his own now, too, without a glance in his older friend's direction. Without the least request for instruction or encouragement.

It wasn't long before their voices began to rise, the two of them speaking loudly enough for Briel to hear them clear over on the far side of the room where he stood. "I don't have it!" the uncle yelled as he reached into his pockets and pulled them inside-out.

"Well then get it!" Gary yelled back in a voice that Briel wouldn't have imagined possible just a minute before.

"Get it where? I don't have it, I tell you!"

"Get it! Just get it!!"

"I can't get it," the uncle whined.

"Yes ya can if ya want to," Gary answered in a hard-edged tone.

"No I can't," the uncle said before dropping to a volume too low for Briel to make out.

So low that the only words he was still able to hear clearly were those which came from Gary, blurting out all at once, "*I owe you money!?* Is that what you're sayin'!!? What the hell are you talkin' about?" The uncle's quiet response soon answered by Gary shouting him down once again. "That's bullshit and you know it is!! I don't owe you for those meals. I was workin' here. Remember? I was takin' care-a the place for ya. And I was doin' it as a favor, too. For no pay! So I don't owe you shit!!"

Back and forth the argument went, back and forth, with the uncle's quiet wheedling and whining unheard by Briel who caught only Gary's bellicose replies. "That's bullshit!" the big kid would yell. Or, "I can't wait. I need it now!" Back and forth, back and forth in what was starting to look like a complete standoff, with neither man backing down and neither of them willing to concede a thing.

Locked in a test of wills which might have gone on forever had it not been for that waitress who happened to pass by right then. That pretty little hippie with the long brown hair flowing down her back and the spaced-out look in her eyes, but that girl who had been declared

off-limits by Gary's uncle, according to what the kid had said. Reserved for the boss despite what she might have to say in the matter. Because just as she was walking by on her way to the kitchen, suddenly Gary reached out and grabbed her and pulled her toward him, gave her a huge kiss right there in front of the uncle. A kiss so passionate, so powerful that it sent her reeling, staggering backward a few steps when the big guy let her go. Gary turned after that to stand at the ready once again, the picture of defiance, while the uncle clenched his own fists in impotent rage, leaning forward like he wanted to attack but holding back. And while Briel stared at them open-mouthed. Asking himself, Is that really him? Is that really the same guy I came in here with? Gary!!? Is that really Gary?

Everyone else in the place was staring by now as well, watching the two men as they stood facing each other, though nobody made a move. No one but the hippie waitress who soon began to recover and regain her bearings, looking around a bit as she started forward. A step or two in the direction of the men as the uncle opened his arms to receive her, ready to comfort her or perhaps to grab her and show the kid how it's really done. Though as she drew near, she took a quick side-step around his arms and headed straight for Gary instead. Began running one hand up and down the body of that big, good-looking kid while tugging gently on his arm with the other and motioning with her head in a let's-go-into-the-back-room-right-now gesture.

Gary's only answer was a distracted smile as he obviously had other things on his mind at the time. Serious things as he stood and stared at his uncle for moments, long moments. Stared and stared until all at once, without warning, he sprang back into action. Reached out to move the waitress gently to one side before shoving his uncle more violently from his path as he made a quick dash for the cash-register. Pushed a button on the machine and started to open it up, though before he could reach inside, suddenly his uncle all over him. The older man recovered from his shock in an instant as he reacted to the assault upon his cash with a fury almost beyond description. Charging over and leaping onto Gary's back where he fought as though for his very life, tearing at his nephew's clothes and hair and clawing at his face and grasping at his throat. Anything to save his money, his precious money.

Because the uncle fought with the strength of madness on his side—money madness—though as Gary fought back, he did so with something that was even more powerful, Briel could see it from as far away as he stood. He could see it in the look of cold conviction that covered the guy's face, the fact that Gary was fighting for far more than money. That he was fighting for dignity as well, for human dignity. For self-respect and the right to call himself a man.

And with so much more riding on the outcome, Gary slowly but surely overcame his uncle's desperate resistance. With no need for help from his slightly older friend. He opened the cash-register all the way up and lifted out the cash tray, looking for the big bills beneath it. Grabbed those bills, not more than a couple from what Briel could see, and then he struggled to get them into his pocket—and to defend that pocket from his uncle who tried to reach inside and pull them back out—as he fought to return the tray to its place. Fought while his ever more hysterical uncle grasped at his arms and wrists and slapped at the tray, finally sent the thing crashing to the floor, coins and bills scattering everywhere as it hit.

“Argh!” A cry of anguish escaped the older man's lips as he dove to the floor and clambered about on hands and knees trying to recover his precious money. Everything else

forgotten for the moment as the younger man went over in a far more dignified way and picked up a bill or two for himself before starting for the exit. Cool and calm as could be.

“Stop him!” the uncle yelled all at once as he looked up to see his nephew about to get away. “Call the police!! I’ve been robbed. Someone call the police!” he went on. So far out of his head by then that he seemed to have no idea that he could have called them himself rather than yelling for someone else to do so. For one of those customers who made no move to help, not one of them, as instead they sat and stared at him and his nephew—or his cousin—in the same way that they had been doing all along.

“Stop him!” he yelled again as he caught sight of Briel standing by the door. “Don’t let him get away!”

“Yeah right,” Briel muttered in reply before greeting his friend and congratulating him on what he had just done. Looking in quiet amazement all the while at that young man he hardly recognized anymore, so utterly changed that it was hard to believe that this could be the same guy who had entered that place a few minutes earlier. Because there was something new about Gary now, something about the way he carried himself and something about the expression on his face. The glow to be seen there, that glow of... of... Of what? Of one who has just made a great discovery, it seemed to Briel. Perhaps even the greatest discovery of all, or at least the beginnings of it: The discovery of himself. The discovery of who and what he was.

“Stop them!” the uncle bellowed at one and all as the two men turned to leave. “Stop those two! They robbed me!!” But still the customers failed to react, only the starry-eyed waitress responding in any way as she waved goodbye to Gary. Waved and blew him a kiss.

“Stop them!” he screamed at the small crowd which had gathered on the sidewalk outside, curious to see what all the commotion was about. “They robbed me!” he shrieked as he went rushing over to the door in pursuit. All to no avail as everyone in the crowd looked on impassively, parted quietly as the two men made their way through. That big kid with the torn shirt and the seabag on his shoulder, walking along like he meant business, while just behind came that black man who looked like he knew how to take care of himself as well. So strong and so determined that there was no one ready to challenge them, criminals though they may be.

And in fact the only person who dared to say or do anything at all was some guy in a car that had pulled over in front of The Bean-In, a guy who waved for them to get in. Shoved the passenger door open and waved again so that soon the two of them were doing as they had been told, sliding inside and taking seats as the car drove off to the sound of the uncle’s cries. “Goddamn you Jacobs! You asshole!! You stay the hell outa this! You got no right gettin’ involved in this thing! You asshole! You’re in trouble now!!” On and on he went, his voice fading rapidly with distance.

“Hey thanks, Mr. Jacobs,” said Gary to the short-haired, conservatively-dressed driver.

“Don’t mention it. Cause I’ve been looking for a chance to pay that guy back for a long time,” Jacobs replied, practically whooping with joy. And with hardly a pause, he rambled on triumphantly, “I’ve been coming around here a lot, you know. Every day, I don’t know how many times, just looking for a chance like this. A chance for a little payback. So it’s me that

should be thanking you. It's me that owes you. Cause did you see that back there? Did you see the look on that guy's face? Man, it was... It was great! It was the best thing I've seen in a long, long time. Best thing ever! And do you know what? I'd go right back there and do it all over again if I thought I could get away with it, just to see that look on his face again. Cause it was fantastic! It was... Oh, it was too much!"

Jacobs drove along as he spoke, drove for blocks and blocks before ever his euphoria began to cool enough for him to turn and ask his passengers where it was that they wanted to go. A query which it fell upon Briel to answer. "My car's parked over by that place they call the Stony Night. Do you know it?"

"Yeah, I sure do," Jacobs said after a slight pause, speaking in a voice that was hard for Briel to decipher. One filled with unexplained emotion, it seemed to him, one that hinted that there must be some deep, underlying significance to what he said. "I know that place real well. Too goddamn well!"

Jacobs quickly snapped back out of it, though, and soon he was turning and driving them back in the desired direction, zigzagging a bit in order to avoid any of the streets that might take them near The Bean-In. And as he drove, he began to explain his plan to them. "What I'll do is I'll drop you guys off and then I'll keep driving around for awhile to draw the heat. Or that is if that idiot back there ever got around to calling the police. Cause if he did, they'll be looking for this car of mine, right? And all I've gotta do if they stop me is to play dumb, just tell em that I thought you guys were being attacked by some crazy-acting hippie back there. Like I was saving you or something."

"Well, we can't thank you enough," said Briel as Gary nodded his assent.

"No. Thank you!!" Jacobs responded with feeling. "Thanks for everything!"

As they approached their destination, Gary spoke to the driver one last time, doing so in a tone that implied a much greater understanding of the situation than anything Briel possessed. "So are ya even now?"

"Even!? Hell no!!" Jacobs roared back. "I'm not even and I'm never gonna be even, not with that asshole I'm not. Cause it's gonna be payback forever, that's what it's gonna be. And besides, who wants to be even? Not me! What I want is I wanta be ahead. I wanta like... I wanta go all the way. You know what I mean? I wanta keep paying back and paying back. Forever!!"

Once they had been dropped off near the car, the two friends began to look around for the guys who would be riding back with them that day, back to State City as Briel always called the town where the university was located. Or more correctly, it was Briel who looked around for his passengers from the outbound leg since Gary had never seen any of them before. Though as he did so, the only one that he was able find nearby was a square-headed kid to whom he had given the nickname of Rex.

"Where are they, Rex? Where are Wolfman and Bobber and the Frog?" Briel asked, using the nicknames with which he had dubbed each of them. The names which those kids liked so well that they had come to use them among themselves all the time, wearing the names as

though they were badges of honor, prizes given to them by the coolest and most respected member of their circle. And they were even proud of the names that were somewhat less than complimentary—such as the Frog.

“I don’t know, man,” Rex mumbled. “Like I think Wolfman and Bobber went down to that music store, but I don’t know about the Frog.”

“Well, ya gotta go get em,” Briel told him emphatically. “We gotta get outa here, and we gotta get out now, cause we got problems.”

“Yeah...?” Rex sounded intrigued.

“Yeah, we gotta go. And now! So go out there and round the guys up, okay? Cause we can’t... Me and Gary here can’t go runnin’ around lookin’ for em. We gotta lay kinda low, if ya know what I mean.”

Rex nodded as though he knew exactly what the guy wanted, he and that other guy with the torn shirt. Like he knew exactly what it was that he had to do as he went dashing off in search of the others.

Gary got into the car as the two of them waited, scooting down low in the backseat so as to make himself less conspicuous while Briel hovered nearby, staying in the shadows as much as he could while looking about anxiously. And it wasn’t long before two of the people they were waiting for made their appearance, Wolfman with a shaggy beard that seemed to cover his whole face and big boy Bobber. When Briel asked about Rex, though, it was only to be told that the two of them hadn’t seen him anywhere, that they had missed each other completely. And he received the same reply a short time later when the Frog came wandering back, big glasses and funny voice. None of them had seen Rex, none of them had seen the guy who had supposedly gone out to find them.

And so rather than being on their way, they were forced to keep hanging around, waiting for Rex’s return. Waiting only to discover when he finally showed up that Bobber and the Frog had wandered off in the meantime. And then when Wolfman stepped up and volunteered to go after them, of course he ended up disappearing as well, not to be seen again for some time. Not to reappear until after one or two of the others had left as the attempted escape continued to stall and stall, repeating the same pattern again and again, with people coming and then leaving without a word, and with Briel’s patience rapidly wearing thin.

And it wasn’t until after things had gone on in that way for a long time, for hours it seemed to the impatient Briel, that as if through sheer coincidence there ever came a moment when everyone happened to be present at the same time, all four of Briel’s passengers—five counting Gary. They were all on the sidewalk in the vicinity of the car so that Briel was finally able to give the order which he had been waiting so anxiously to give, the order for them to get inside and get on with their much-delayed getaway. Though wouldn’t you know it that just as he spoke, Bobber mumbled something about having one last thing that he wanted to do as he started to wander off. Took a step or two...

“Get the fuck inside the car!” Gary hollered out the window all at once. Hollered in a voice that Briel wouldn’t have thought possible just an hour or two earlier. With a bark to it now, a bite like it came from someone even bigger and stronger than what he knew Gary to be, as though somehow in the aftermath of the fight with his uncle, the guy had grown larger, more imposing. That scrawny frame of his visibly filled out, it seemed to Briel as he paused for a moment to look the guy over. More muscular than what he had been before, more of a man.

And Gary’s voice carried such authority now that it froze Bobber in his tracks, completely intimidated and unsure how to respond. Not until Briel told him calmly, “Ya heard what the man said,” at which Bobber did exactly as he had been told. He got into the car with the others so that at last they were able to get on their way. Off to State City. And it wasn’t until some time later, as they were passing the city limits, that Briel suddenly realized that he had forgotten all about the ostensible purpose of his journey that day. He had forgotten to buy the concert tickets which had supposedly drawn him to the big city in the first place.

NO GOIN’ BACK

Back at State City and back to the life which he had been living over the last few months, Briel found himself being assailed with doubts. Had he done the right thing by inviting Gary to come and stay with him? he asked. Both for Gary’s sake, for the way it had led to such a violent rupture with his uncle, and also for his own sake. Had he done something that he would soon come to regret? Was he opening himself up too much and too quickly by letting that kid into his life? Or on the other hand, was he asking too much of him? Too much intimacy, too much human contact. Because when you got right down to it, he knew very little about the guy, that kid who had seemed so innocent and genuine back when they first met but who had changed so dramatically in the days that followed. Changed so completely that sometimes Briel had to ask himself if this was really him, the same open and unaffected kid with whom he had made such a deep connection on the night of that concert. Or at least what he had thought at the time to have been a deep connection, though now as he looked back he no longer knew what to think.

And the events which took place during the first week or so of the guy’s residence in that big old house did nothing to clarify Briel’s thinking, nothing but add to the confusion. Because at the time everyone living there was gearing up for the summer break which lay just around the corner, whooping it up in what seemed like one long end-of-semester party, with guys drinking and smoking dope every single night, chasing whatever girls dared to show their faces. In big groups or small groups, it didn’t matter which, as some of them would drop out from time to time in order to study for exams or whatnot, so that the faces were always changing. All of them but Gary’s, that is. The one person who could be relied upon to be there night after night, party after party. Always stoned and usually drunk whether he wanted to be or not. Whether he attended those parties through choice or through force of circumstance, there because of the fact that they always took place in the living room where he was crashing on the sofa.

But whatever the kid’s motivation may have been, Briel found that he was seeing much less of Gary during those days than what he had expected—and dreaded in a way. The guy frequently absent when Briel came home, out partying or running around or who knew what,

while even on those afternoons or evenings when both of them were there at the same time, it seemed like the interaction between them consisted of little more than passing joints and saying stupid things. Something similar to the way that Briel related to all the other guys in the house. And so it didn't take long before his opinion of Gary began to enter into a serious state of decline, asking himself what it was that he had ever seen in that guy, that kid who now seemed to him like just another typical young idiot. Especially so when drunk as he so often was, staggering about and throwing his weight around, using his size and his rapidly-growing reputation to intimidate anyone who happened to get in his way.

Despite his occasional bluster, though, Gary seemed to be well-liked among the guys living in the house. Respected even. Because not only had he been brought there by the group's reluctant leader and leading light, but at the same time he was someone who could lay his own claim to a certain tough-guy legitimacy. Someone who knew how to take care of himself in a pinch, and someone who had been to places and done things that none of them had ever done. And he had been to those places on his own, too, working his passage.

So apparently it was only Briel who entertained serious doubts about Gary. Only Briel who asked himself what had happened to that kid he had known before. And it wasn't until early one morning when he happened to come into the big living room and find Gary awake and sober for once that he ever got a chance to dispel a few of those doubts. A chance to sit down and have the first real conversation that they'd had since the guy's arrival, a conversation without poses or false-fronts. For front it was, Briel quickly came to see on that day when for once the barrier was down, Gary speaking and acting in the old way. Without pretense and with the words coming straight from that heart which hadn't changed at all. Not really, not as far as Briel could tell. Because instead it remained as simple and unaffected as ever, as much the heart of the Gary he first met as it had ever been, as much the heart of that big, friendly kid who attended the concert that night.

And as Briel continued with his reassessment of his friend, it soon became apparent that the one thing which had truly changed about the guy was his external circumstances. The fact that now for the first time ever he was completely on his own, having cut the strings that once held him and leaped headfirst into a whole new life. Having left home at last, and left it all the way. Not living aboard a ship like what he had done before and not hanging around with some probable relative either, but instead he was living among strangers now and doing so with no outside support and hardly any money. Only what little he'd already had on him along with the small amount which he had managed to get from the cash-register of that cheapskate uncle of his. That guy who had refused to pay what he owed and who probably couldn't have paid even had he wanted to, as little business as he seemed to be doing in that coffeehouse of his.

Briel's and Gary's session didn't last very long that morning, only until it was interrupted by the arrival of one of the other inhabitants of the house and by Gary's instant clam-up. His conversion into that other self, the phony one, strong-and-silent when sober yet bold and self-assured, such as he had been pretending to be over the last week and a half. Making a sudden transformation which may have fooled the other guy, though it did nothing to Briel or to his opinion of his friend. Because it was all so obvious to him now, so transparent that the only reaction his friend's antics elicited was a smile, a knowing smile.

Short though the conversation may have been that morning, still it left a deep impression upon Briel. It left him lost in his thoughts for hours on end while strangely elated at the same time. Reveling in the brief moments of genuine contact with the real Gary which he had enjoyed and craving more. More intimacy, more authenticity. More of all those things which he had aspired to back when he first began to think about inviting Gary to come and stay with him.

And so it was in hopes of achieving more of that meaningful interaction that Briel arose even earlier the next morning, got up before dawn and made his way quietly toward the living room, trying not to disturb anyone as he went to see whether or not his friend was awake. Whether the guy was on the same wavelength as him, feeling the same need for more talk. Real talk. And as Briel bent his head and peered down the stairway into the living room, he found to his delight that indeed Gary was on that wavelength, indeed he was sitting there wide awake, waiting for his friend to appear. Waiting for another chance to talk about the things that were in his heart.

As much as two people may desire to open their hearts to each other, though, the mechanics of actually doing so are never so simple and straightforward, as instead they involve a great deal of circumspection. Of talking around the things that they truly want to say, of hinting at those things or even hiding them behind small-talk. And the conversation which took place that morning between Gary and Briel was no exception to that rule. It was a conversation about unimportant things that had nothing to do with what was really on their minds. The emptiness, the loneliness. Those things that were on Briel's mind, in any case, but those things that he was unable to discuss so easily. And so in place of them, he talked about events which had occurred around the house and about some of the people who lived there. Finally working his way up to something of slightly more importance, up to asking Gary about his plans for the summer which lay only days away.

"Oh, I'll just get a ship, I suppose" Gary answered him casually. "That's what seamen do, ya know."

"But where? Around here?"

"No, back in the city, a course. Cause that's where the union hall is."

"The city? You can't go back there, can ya? Not when your uncle or the police or someone might be lookin' for ya."

"The police?" Evidently Gary hadn't thought about that.

"Yeah, like if he called em on ya or somethin'."

"Hey ya know, you're right," Gary said slowly and thoughtfully. Adding after a short pause, "And besides that, the ship's gone."

"The ship!?" Briel couldn't believe that the guy would still be stuck on that idea, like he still thought that he owed it to the ship to go to Vietnam on it or something.

Before he could say any more, though, Gary moved quickly to dispel his concern. "Cause like that's where I was sleepin', remember? So now I got no place to stay."

"Oh yeah, that's right."

"So I don't know. I guess I'll just..." Gary seemed to be searching for some other option. Searching but failing as he finally conceded in a voice of resignation, "I guess I'll just have to go back home is all. I'll have to go ship outa there, same as I did before."

"Yeah sure, you can do that." Briel offered encouragement to his friend, feeling from the tone of the guy's voice that he might need it.

"I got money in the bank back there, ya know, and I can always get another ship. But it's just that..."

"Just what? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, man, but it's like... I mean, it feels wrong to me. It feels like... I don't know. Like I'd be goin' backwards or somethin'."

"By goin' back home?"

"Yeah, goin' back! That's what's wrong. Cause like... I don't wanta go that way, I wanta go the other way. I wanta go ahead, man. I wanta go forward in my life." Gary said this last in a tone that was far more eloquent than the words themselves.

"Well ya know, two steps forward and one step back," Briel began before falling silent at the realization of the weakness of the argument which he was about to offer.

Silent for long, awkward moments until finally it was Gary who broke the impasse. "So what about you?" he asked. "Are ya goin' home this summer?"

"Home? Me?" Briel was taken completely off-guard as he saw the conversation suddenly being turned toward himself and his own plans, a topic about which he had no idea what to say.

"Yeah, you know. Are ya gonna go see your folks? Your old friends?"

Was he going to go see those people and those places which he had left so long ago? Those places to which it was impossible for him ever to return? Truly return. Not after all the things that he had seen and the changes he had been through. Not when he had ceased to be the person who once grew up there. So how could he answer a question like that? What could he say without going into a lot of things that he wasn't ready to talk about yet?

What could he do but fumble around in wordless confusion until relieved of the obligation to reply by Gary's next question. "Or how bout the revolution? Are ya gonna go get involved in that? This bein' the summer-a the revolution like ya said."

“The revolution!? What revolution are you talking about?” Briel burst out in relief at the change of subject.

“You know...” Gary mumbled weakly.

“No I don’t,” Briel cut him off in a voice that practically dripped with sarcasm, though he knew not why. “Do ya mean the sexual revolution? Is that what ya mean? Or how bout the revolution in laundry detergent? Is that the revolution you’re talkin’ about?”

And Briel continued on in that same vein for some time, mocking Gary’s simple question and ridiculing it. Though during the entire time that he spoke, there was a certain part of him that wasn’t involved in the humiliation of his friend, a part that was sitting back and watching. Asking, What are you doing? Why are you talking to Gary that way? Can’t you see that it was an honest question? And can’t you see what you’re doing to him by saying those things? Can’t you see the look on his face? There was a part of him that would have nothing to do with that asshole using his bitter tongue to strike back at this person who had threatened to delve too deeply into his personal life. Threatened to ask him questions that he wasn’t ready to answer. Not yet. Maybe never. Threatened to ask him to reveal parts of himself which he preferred to keep hidden.

And Briel was still in full sarcastic-assault mode when their discussion came to an abrupt end as the Frog came wandering into the room, walking in much earlier and with far less of a hangover than what he deserved considering the way he had been drinking the night before. He came in and Briel fell silent while at the same time Gary went through another of his instant metamorphoses, suddenly became that other Gary, strong-and-silent.

Briel was back early the next morning. He was back to apologize for the things he had said, and he was relieved when he entered the living room to find Gary waiting for him. “Hey, I’m sorry, man,” he began after the briefest of greetings. “I’m sorry for what I said yesterday. And I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings or nothin’, but it’s just... It was like a bad joke is all. Like a joke that went wrong, ya know. And like... Well, ya know I’m really not into all that political bullshit, don’t ya? So like I was just makin’ fun of it. Ya know?”

Following that introduction, Briel went on to talk for some time about his hatred of politics and all things political. Holding it up as though that had actually been the problem of the day before rather than admitting to any of the real emotions which had led to his outburst. Not admitting them to Gary and not to himself either, as instead he rambled on and on in what quickly became a virtual monologue, well-informed and well-spoken as he was when it came to political issues and current events while his audience was neither of those things. He attacked the revolution and bemoaned its shortcomings—the so-called revolution, that media event of 1968 which so many people took so seriously at the time, unaware of the fact that it would soon come to nothing. His words harsh and disparaging as he criticized this group or that leader, individuals and organizations about which his audience knew nothing to judge from the blank expression on the guy’s face each time that a new one was brought up, so that had it not been for the tone of barely-suppressed emotion in his voice, there would have been nothing to hint at the true depth of his feelings. At the fact that down inside he, too, was a believer. He, too, bought into the myth of radical change. And as he rattled away, his critiques seemed to keep boiling steadily down

toward his one most deep-seated complaint, try as he might to prevent it. Down to the fact that there seemed to be no place within that movement for a person such as himself: a man of indeterminate race and convictions, though he never used those actual terms. A man who was irretrievably different, still an original whether he wanted to be or not.

And his whining had been going on in that way for many minutes before ever he took a break, paused long enough for Gary to add his own two-bits to the conversation. “Ya know what ya need, don’t ya? What ya really need?”

“What I really need...?”

“Ya need a revolution by guys like you, that’s what ya need. A revolution by and for guys like you.”

“Guys like me?” Briel didn’t know what the kid could be getting at. Asking himself if he was talking about blacks. Or semi-blacks, anyway. Or did the guy mean veterans? It was hard to tell what he might mean since Briel hardly knew how to define himself.

So that had his dilemma not proven to be so short-lived, Gary moving quickly to explain... “Ya need a revolution by Briels, that’s what ya need. One where all the Briels get together and change the whole world.”

“All the Briels? How many of us do ya think there are?”

“How many do ya need?” he shot back as the two of them burst into laughter. The first time they had laughed together in ages, it seemed.

They laughed so loudly that Briel began to worry about waking people up, suggesting as the laughter subsided that they move their little two-man discussion group into his room where they would be able to sit and talk to their hearts’ content. Talk until they ran out of things to say, as they soon set out to do. Walking up the stairs and down the hallway to Briel’s room where he took a seat on the unmade bed while Gary sat down on the only chair in the room, the hard wooden desk chair, and where soon the two of them took back up where they had just left off. Talking and joking about Briel-revolutions before going on to talk about other, more serious things. Personal things now rather than the same old stuff, war and poverty and racism and you-name-it. Things like their hopes and their dreams and their ambitions. And they even talked about that thing which had led to the problems of the day before, about home and about never going back there again. They talked as Briel began to open himself up for the first time in years, began to discuss some of those things which he had been unable to speak of even a single day before. Began to open his heart and his soul a little bit, at least. A crack, a tiny crack.

Given the tremendous success of that day’s discussion, of course Briel and Gary met again the next morning, headed straight for Briel’s room where they sat down and resumed their discussion.

“Hey, I was thinkin’ about what ya said yesterday about home. About how ya should never go back there,” Gary began in a misinterpretation of one of the things that Briel had talked about the day before, evidently having heard only what he had wanted to hear. “Well you’re

right, man. A person should never go back there cause like... That's goin' backwards instead-a forward. Just like ya said."

"Yeah...?" Briel didn't know how to answer a statement like that. What to say in response to such a gross misunderstanding of what he had tried to say.

Though in the end he didn't have to say more as Gary soon continued on with his thought. "So anyway, I kept thinkin' about it all day long, and I finally made my decision. I'm not goin' back home. Hell no! I'm not goin' backwards, I'm goin' forward. I'm headin' for the Gulf-a Mexico, that's where I'm goin'!" This last phrase nearly shouted in triumph.

"The Gulf of Mexico? What're you talking about?"

"That's where I'm gonna go get my next ship. Down in the Gulf."

"In the Gulf? Wow, that's..." Briel mumbled more than spoke. "That's a surprise. That's..."

"Yeah, it kinda came outa nowhere, didn't it? But ya know, shippin's supposed to be pretty good down there, and I heard about this place where ya can stay while you're lookin' for a ship. A place they say is so cheap that even I can afford to stay there, so that's where I'm goin'."

"Okay, so uh... So how're ya gonna get there?"

"Hitchin', I guess. Cause that's about the only way I got for movin' around right now. And like even if I go back home, I still gotta hitchhike there. So ya know, I may as well hitchhike goin' forward instead-a goin' backwards, right?"

"Yeah, ya got a point there."

"Damn right I got a point," Gary said with conviction. And after that he went on to describe a few of the details of his plan, telling what he had heard about that cheap seaman's hotel down in the Gulf and what he knew about the shipping around there, and he even talked about the route that he planned on taking. Told about the highways that he would hitchhike along and mentioned a few of the cities that he would be passing through.

"Hey, speakin' of goin' down there," Briel interrupted his friend all at once as the mention of one of those cities had brought on a sudden Eureka moment. "Did ya hear about that guy who's lookin' for someone to hitch with him?"

"Hitch with him...? No, where's he goin'?"

"He's from some Bibleburg down that way. Somewhere like where ya were just talkin' about goin'. Somewhere on the way to the Gulf."

"Yeah? Well, I guess..."

“And it’s pretty far, too, from what I hear. Like a good parta the way there, like halfway or a third-a the way or somethin’, so like... Ya can have company.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. It sounds real good. So who is he?”

Briel responded to the question by giving Gary all the information that he had on the guy, after which the two of them returned to the details of the proposed trip. Talking about the country and the heat and humidity down there in the summertime and about all the rednecks that Gary was sure to encounter on his journey. They went on in that way until they had exhausted the subject and a lull appeared in their conversation. Finally broken by Gary. “So what about you, man? What’re ya gonna do now? This summer, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll probably just hang out I guess.” Briel didn’t want to get any more specific than that right then, and perhaps he couldn’t have said more even had he tried since the fact was that he had no plans.

“No...? Well ya know what ya oughta do?”

“No, what?” Briel waited to hear what advice he was about to be offered, wondering whether it would be about finding a girlfriend or going to music festivals or what. And he was completely unprepared for what was to come next.

“Ya oughta go look up the family-a that friend-a yours who died in Vietnam.”

“Died!? He’s not dead!” Briel shot back in an instant. What’s he talking about? How did this guy...? “How’d you know about him?” How could he possibly know anything about Joe when Briel had never said a word about him? Nothing! When he had never even mentioned his existence. He was sure of that.

“It’s obvious, man,” Gary said in a quiet voice. “It’s written all over ya.”

“Written all over me...?” What was going on now? Was this guy going psychic on him or what? Was he actually reading Briel’s mind in the way that he claimed to be? The whole thing was so strange that Briel had no idea what to think or how to act. Whether to feel threatened or angry or what. And for the moment what he felt more than anything else was a great sense of curiosity. Intrigued in some strange way and wanting to know more. Wanting to know what the hell was going on.

“Yeah man, it’s plain as a book. And I been seein’ it all along, ever since I first met ya. I been seein’ that big hole inside ya there. That hole where... What’s his name?”

“Joe,” Briel went along passively, unable to resist the flow of the conversation.

“That hole where Joe used to be. Or where he still is really. I can see it, man. Big as a house.” Gary paused for a moment, but then as Briel sat mute, soon he continued on with his line of reasoning. “So ya know what ya gotta do, don’t ya?”

Briel grunted in reply.

“Ya gotta go see him, man. Ya gotta go visit him. That’s what ya gotta do.”

“See him...? I can’t,” Briel practically whispered.

“Yes ya can, man. Sure ya can. Cause ya got to.”

“No I can’t, I tell ya! I can’t do it.” Briel’s voice was starting to regain its strength.

“Yes ya can. Ya...”

“No I can’t!” Briel was shouting now. “I can’t see him cause he’s not there anymore!”

“Not there? I thought ya said...”

“I mean, he’s not dead, but he’s not... It’s like it’s not him anymore, cause he’s like...” Briel searched for a word. “It’s like he’s only half a man now. Like that’s all there is left of him. Just half a man. Just...”

As Briel faded into silence, Gary spoke once again. “No man, it doesn’t work that way. Cause like whatever happened to his body, he’s still the same man inside. He’s still a whole man.”

“No he’s not!!” Briel’s anger suddenly boiled over. An anger that came from deep within, bursting to the surface now with such fury that it practically overwhelmed him. “You don’t know, man, cause you weren’t there!! You didn’t see what happened to him! You didn’t see what that shell did! You don’t know fuck-all!!”

“Hey man, take it easy...” Gary began in a soothing voice.

Only to be shouted down by Briel’s exploding rage. “What the fuck are you talkin’ about, take it easy!? You don’t know a fuckin’ thing about it!! You don’t know shit, you fuckin’ asshole! Comin’ around here tellin’ me how to live my life! When you don’t know nothin’ about it, and you don’t even got a fuckin’ life-a your own! Cause you got nothin’, man!! Ya hear me!? You’re nothin’! That’s what you are. Nothin’!!!”

Gary made no attempt to answer Briel’s outburst, but instead he rose from his chair and started to leave. Paused as he reached the door to offer one last bit of advice. “Ya know, ya gotta think about him, too, man. Cause he probably needs you even more than you need him.”

“Get the fuck outa here!! There ain’t nobody needs me. Nobody!! And there ain’t nobody I need either. So get the fuck out! I don’t need you, and I don’t want you. I don’t want you comin’ around here ever again! Ya hear me!? I want you to stay the fuck away from me! I don’t ever wanta see you again!!”

That was the last time that the two of them spoke. They avoided each other after that, turning away whenever they saw the other approaching. And because of that, Gary never got the chance to thank Briel for having given him a place to stay and for setting him up with a

hitchhiking partner when he left town at the end of term a few days later. Never got the chance to repay any of that debt with so much as a thank you.

And as for Briel, his opportunity to thank Gary had long since passed when he finally decided later on that summer to go ahead and take the guy's advice and make that trip to California. To go see Joe and try to begin the healing process—for both of them.

PART III

RECALL

In which the mind calls up the memories and concepts associated with that which has been named.

ENTER GABRIEL

Gabriel was teased about many things when he was a boy, with his name somewhere near the top of the list. And when one of the local bullies called him Grape-Peel one day, the nickname stuck for years, followed him around wherever he went. And it wasn't until he was in college and everyone he knew was starting to go hippie that he ever got a chance to turn the tables on that bully in a certain way. That at a time when some of the coolest people around were adopting strange and unconventional names, he was able to rechristen himself Grape.

Grape was a quiet, dreamy kid growing up. One with such a vivid imagination that he lived much of his childhood there rather than spending his time in that boring place we call the real world. He would spend hours, even days lost in his fantasies, imagining himself to be doing great things. And it would be hard to say just how many times he pinned on the sheriff's badge and shot it out with the bad guys, or how many times he led the charge against the Krauts or the Japs, or how many times he headed out on a great adventure into the wild, the unknown. Whatever it was that he had seen the hero of some movie do.

And it was much the same when it came to playing sports. Because whenever he came up to bat, it was always the ninth inning of the seventh game of the World Series, or when he raced against a friend he was always going for Olympic gold. This despite the fact that in real life, his athletic performances fell somewhere on the low side of mediocre. The fact that he struck out far more often than he won the Series, and that while he may not have been the last one picked when the neighborhood kids were choosing up sides, he was always among the last, being chosen just ahead of the fat kids and the little shrimps.

To look at him, though, there was no reason why he couldn't have been a better athlete than he was. None at all. Because he was reasonably big and strong and fast, and if only he had been able to get his head out of the clouds for a few minutes and concentrate on the games that he was playing, he might actually have been good. He might have won some of the glory that he always dreamed about. Though unfortunately for him, that was something that he just couldn't do.

Because the clouds? That was where his head longed to be. That was where it wanted to spend its time, in those other places, those other worlds. And while he loved the worlds that he saw on display when he went to the movies or watched TV, Grape soon came to love the worlds which he discovered in books even more. He loved to enter into those worlds and there to linger,

reading the books slowly and methodically so as to make the experience go on and on. For days or weeks. However long he could draw them out, those precious hours spent reading and living out the romantic tales in his head. All those tales about knights and their ladies, about frontiersmen and Indians, about sailors roaming the seas. Those tales about beautiful, far-off places which he found so inviting, so captivating once he had entered inside, that at times he would nearly lose himself altogether. Walk around seeing the scenes from those literary worlds strangely superimposed upon the mundane world that surrounded him.

So given his deep love of books, of course Grape chose to major in English when he went off to college. He chose to study the works of the great writers of the past in order to join their ranks someday, as is the case with so many English majors. Though while that may have been what he had in mind when he picked out that area of study, it wasn't the reason that he gave to his parents. Not to them. Not when he knew that they would never understand his desire to write and create. Not when he knew how deeply they distrusted everything that had to do with creativity or even the liberal arts in general, since in their minds the word liberalism was somehow closely associated with Satanism. And so rather than get into a discussion which he knew could never be won, Grape decided instead to give his parents a slightly revised version of the story on the day when he first broke the news. He decided to tell them that his goal was to teach English someday and to use his position to introduce kids to good, morally-uplifting literature. To present them with the sorts of books which he knew that his parents would approve of, books in which goodness and godliness triumph over evil.

Or in other words, he decided to tell them exactly what they wanted to hear just as he had been doing all his life. He the good little boy, so sweet and obedient. A boy who never argued back even when he knew his parents to be wrong. Because he couldn't bring himself to do a thing like that, not after the way in which he was raised. Not when he feared them so much. Feared not their wrath but rather the withdrawal of their love, that smotheringly intense love and that unstinting approval of everything he did.

That love and approval which he wouldn't have known how to live without, so that as Grape's ideas and opinions slowly evolved during his high school years, or perhaps even earlier, he was forced to keep them to himself. Able to discuss those "radical" new ideas with no one outside a small circle of trusted friends who he knew would never inform on him, just as they knew that he would never inform on them. And just as all of them knew that they could never say a word around his little sister Christine once she was old enough to enter high school herself. That little tattletale of a sister who had already turned him in to their parents once before, back when the two of them were in middle school together, when she had heard him express some of his first "anti-Christian" thoughts. And when as a result he had found himself faced with some of the most difficult moments of his life, forced to grovel and to prevaricate and to deny everything, absolutely everything. And forced to swear that he would never again trust Christine with anything.

That he would only trust those other rebels who had as much to lose as he did. Those other "free-thinkers" who seemed to be the only ones in that entire Bible-thumping town who were capable of seeing a world which hadn't been filtered through the biblical/conservative prism that colored the thinking of all the rest of the inhabitants. Capable of thinking for themselves and forming opinions of their own, the group of them were convinced as they slowly

but surely came to adopt a whole series of crazy, modern ideas. Outrageous ideas like when they began to say that there could actually be such a thing as evolution. To say it right out loud, too—among themselves—and to say that maybe the world was more than a few thousand years old. Or even more shockingly, they eventually came to believe that it was okay for the races to mix. Not through inter-marriage, of course, since not even they ever reached that level of insanity, but rather on a social level. Telling each other that it was okay for whites and blacks to live together. Without segregation. Sharing the world and society and even public bathrooms. Even water fountains.

Oh, they were a wild and crazy bunch, those friends of Grape's. And whenever he was with them, he felt so brave, so daring. He saw himself as the fire-breathing rebel fighting for what he believed in. Truth, Justice and the American Way. He saw himself as taking a stand once and for all, putting his life on the line. Though the moment he got home, all that would disappear in a flash, the rebel nowhere to be seen as he would instantly transform back into his parents' good-little-boy. The one who never talked back, never for a minute would have entertained subversive thoughts such as those.

And it wasn't until after he had put some physical distance between himself and his parents by going off to college that Grape ever managed to escape that seesaw and become himself full-time. Off to a college which he had chosen, though one for which he had to fight a long campaign before ever he gained his parents' consent. Because not only was the college which he wanted to attend not a Christian school as they had initially insisted, but in fact it wasn't even located in their state, being instead in a whole other state which lay some distance away. A state which was known to be a home to liberals! A few of them anyway. Card-carrying liberals! So that had it not been for the fact that some famous Christian writer was an alumnus of that very school, his parents never would have gone along. Never would have allowed him to move to a place which lay so far outside their view and their influence. Even outside the view of their little spy.

But give their consent they did in the end, their consent for Grape to go off to a whole new world where he was finally able to come out into the open with what he thought and felt. Able to speak his mind in support of what, on a national scale, would probably have been considered a set of rather conventional, moderately-liberal views on the great questions of the day. Racism, poverty, the war. A set of opinions which, while they may have been far from original, were at least heartfelt as he expressed them openly if unimaginatively for the first time ever. And in a move that surely would have shocked his parents no end had they known about it, he soon found himself falling in with a circle of friends at the university that actually included a black member.

A black man! Can you imagine that? Can you imagine what his parents would have said had they known? Those parents who had been so scandalized a few years before when they found out that a family of Methodists was moving into their neighborhood.

Grape was never a core-member of that group of friends, however. He never lived in the big, old house that many of them shared, though he was a frequent visitor and a friend of several of its inhabitants. Because there was something about those guys and that house of theirs that appealed to him on a deep level. Something about the sense of freedom and justice and progress

that they seemed to exude. As though they were doing the right thing and standing up for the things that they believed in. The things that Grape believed in as well. That bunch of kids from towns and cities all over that part of the country, some of them from towns nearly as conservative as his own, but those kids who once they had arrived at college, had gone hippie to one extent or another, smoking pot and letting their hair grow long, while whenever they talked it was about progressive ideas. When it wasn't about girls or music or cars or other miscellaneous nonsense, that is. Because the fact was that those friends of his had gone over to the other side, just as so many other college kids were doing all across the country in those final years of the old decade, those first days of the brand new one, the seventies. They had joined the flood, the trickle of the Summer of Love which had grown and expanded into the rising waves of the next couple years until by then it had become a total inundation.

And Grape was one of the hippies. Of course he was! He was into everything that they were into, and he supported everything that they supported. Peace and love. He read all the usual books: Vonnegut and Brautigan and *Catch 22*, not to mention Hermann Hesse, and he enjoyed those books, he really did. He ate them up. Because the books were good, they were great. Unlike the concerts which he was sometimes forced to attend with the others in order to show that he was cool. Those concerts where the music would be so loud and so grating that he often wanted to cover his ears or run outside, only putting up with it because of what the others would have said and thought had he done so. Or had he ever told them that what he really liked was something softer and sweeter. Something like Sonny and Cher, or like that new group he had heard about recently, that... What was their name?... The Carpenters.

And so he kept quiet instead, pretended to like it as he went to the concerts that everyone-who-was-anyone had to attend. And he had even joined in on the talk of the previous year about going up to New York for the big concert to be held at Woodstock. All that empty talk, as it turned out, since none of his friends ever went. Or at least they didn't go there back at the time, back when the concert was actually going on. But instead it wasn't until years later, as they were growing older and advancing well into middle age, that one after another those guys suddenly began to recall that, yes, in fact he had gone there, he had been at the great musical event. And then in another of those strange mysteries of the effects of time upon memory, it seemed that the roles played by each of them somehow grew larger and more central with each passing year.

Grape never went there, though, not even in his golden years. Not even in his fertile imagination. Though he did go to all the local concerts which he felt obliged to attend, and at the same time he let his hair grow out an inch or two, let it get somewhat shaggy. Just enough to be acceptable within his circle of friends though no more than that since he never knew when he might be going home for a visit or—God forbid—when his parents might be coming to visit him. Because each time that he looked at himself in the mirror, each time he saw that slightly-too-long hair, he could just see and hear their reaction. Their disbelief, their disappointment. And so knowing that he couldn't possibly explain it to them with the old everyone's-wearing-it-that-way, not when they were sure to come back with the old if-everyone-was-jumping-off-a-cliff-would-you-do-it-too? he knew that he would need a different strategy if ever he was caught without a chance to make a quick stop at a barbershop before seeing them. A strategy such as the one which he finally hit upon: a claim of simple laziness or forgetfulness, of telling them that he just hadn't gotten around to cutting it lately.

That was something which might actually work given the fact that his hair wasn't all that long. It might allow him to keep his secrets, the new and ever more radical thoughts that filled his head. And it might help to keep an even bigger secret as well, the story of what happened to him on one certain day when he was at the big, old house. That day on which he became a hippie for real, perhaps you could say. When during one of his early visits to the house, as a joint was being passed around in the way that they so often were, he decided not to pretend to smoke it as he had done on previous visits, not to pass it along surreptitiously when no one was paying attention, but instead he took a toke for real. He put the joint up to his lips and inhaled.

And do you know what? Grape liked it, he actually liked the stuff. He liked the feeling it gave him, the way it shook up his mind a little bit, made him see things from such a different angle. The world and the things in it. He liked it so much that he swore to himself to smoke it again every chance he got. At the big, old house and at his own place as well, buying a few lids himself over the following months and years and sharing the joints he rolled with whoever happened to be present.

He liked it so much, in fact, that when the opportunity presented itself for him to take the next big step, and to do so in what everyone said would be a highly favorable setting, he seized it. When on a camping trip with a group of friends, one of whom pulled out a few little brown pills, Grape took one and swallowed it. He dropped, as the expression went. Not LSD since he had read so many horror stories about it, but instead he dropped the mescaline which that friend had to offer. That little pill which he took for mescaline, in any case, though as any chemist from the time can tell you, virtually all the "mescaline" being sold back then was actually low-grade LSD.

So anyway Grape dropped it, whatever it may have been, and soon he found his whole world turned upside-down. His mind flying off to who-knew-where as he saw strange new dimensions opening up before him wherever he looked, yawning chasms and twisting pretzels and spirals spinning off in every direction. Even in directions that couldn't possibly exist. And as all the while visions and memories and deep thoughts and drivel went shooting past in a giant jumble. Visions of adventure which called to him in some strange, silent way. Whole lifetimes of adventure just waiting for him somewhere out there, he could hear the soundless cry, luring him on and luring him on until finally he was setting out to follow. To leave behind the civilized world of the campsite as he went wandering off into the wilderness alone, only his fantasies for company. Off to stroll the woods with Chingachgook by his side, off to howl at the moon with Buck, off to stalk big game with Hemingway. Off to charge up mountains and leap across raging cataracts, and to explore every corner of that wild and unknown land. Off to live, truly live. To Experience! Until finally as the come-down began to take hold and he made his way back to camp in the late afternoon, sat staring at the campfire for hours as darkness descended, all he could do was to shake his head in wonder. Trying to absorb everything that he had just been through. Trying to put it into words as was his wont.

And whether he succeeded in that endeavor or not, Grape found when he awoke the next morning that suddenly he had a clarity of mind such as he had never known before. A clarity of vision, of purpose. A plan. Because as he reflected upon his experiences of the previous day, he knew that at last he had found what he needed as a writer. He had found his theme! he told himself as he recalled that strange new mental world which he had discovered. Those weird new

dimensions, those whole new planes of existence which he could spend an entire literary lifetime exploring and getting to know. Exploring them in his books, that is, not through the use of any more chemicals stronger than marijuana since once had been enough for him. Almost too much. But instead he would spend the coming years writing and writing—under a pen name, he quickly added, since he didn't want his parents to find out, didn't want his little sister to figure it out, either. He would spend the years writing and writing, delving ever more deeply into the mysteries of the human mind, and especially into the minds of people involved in the types of adventures such as he... Or wait a minute. What sorts of adventures had he ever had? he asked himself. And what sorts of interesting and colorful characters had he ever met? He who had lived such a quiet, conventional life so far. What sort of material did he have to write about? What besides hanging out at that old house or going to concerts or going on camping trips or...

Hey! What if he were to head out onto The Road? The idea struck him all at once. What if he were to go out and wander around like some sort of latter-day Kerouac? It seemed like a great idea when it first came to him, a wonderful source of writing material. Though as he began to turn it over in his head in the days and weeks that followed, he soon came to see that there was one big problem with that plan of his. There was the fact that he would never have the courage to actually go out and do something like that, strap a pack onto his back and then stand by the side of the road with his thumb out, casting his fate to the wind. Or at least to the whims of the passing drivers. He would never dare to take such a risk as that. Not him. So that in the end that entire world of adventure, that world of The Road could never be more than a dream for him, an impossible dream.

Soon to be forgotten as a serious plan as he pushed it far into the depths of his mind where it rapidly devolved into little more than a vague notion. A lost thought. Which perhaps was why the whole idea seemed so fresh and new to him on that day when suddenly it all came flashing back. When on the day after the killings at Kent State, as he searched about for some way to express his anger and frustration over what had happened there—something more radical than simply attending an anti-war demonstration—the idea came to him all at once as though from out of nowhere. On the spur of the moment. The idea of rising up against everything that America stood for in those days, thumbing his nose at everything that passed for values in that sick society. The violence and the hypocrisy and the crass materialism. The idea of throwing away the entire phony façade which the American Dream had become by becoming a vagabond himself, a bum who would spend the rest of his life on The Road.

Or at least one who would go out and hitchhike all the way home when the school year ended in a few weeks' time.

He wasn't crazy enough to do something like that on his own, however. Not even as his emotions boiled somewhere near the breaking point. And so instead the plan which he put together in his head over the next day or two was one in which he would make the trip with someone else, some friend or acquaintance. Someone to go along with him and share the adventures. The dangers. Someone, anyone, he said to himself as he began to ask around among the people he knew at school, the people who lived or hung around at the big, old house and the people in his classes and others. He asked and asked though it was only to find that none of them was willing to take him up on it, that all of them were afraid to go or else they had excuses. That not one of them was willing to come along with him on the great undertaking.

And with each rejection that he received, Grape found that a strange evolution was beginning to take place in his feelings toward the project. A change which started slowly only to strengthen and harden as the days and weeks went by, and as the realization grew within him that he was never going to find anyone brave enough to go along. That his great act of rebellion was going to end right there, right where it had begun, as a mere pronouncement on his part of his intentions to make the trip, with no need ever to back up the words with deeds. And it was all because of the cowardice of his friends, he told himself with a growing sense of relief as the reality sank in ever more deeply. Because he had done his part, hadn't he? He had declared his willingness to go—and even to let his parents know what he had done! So that if everyone else was too scared to go with him, that was their fault, not his. He who had never backed down. He who was still the daring rebel despite the fact that in the end he would be making the trip home for the summer aboard a bus.

Or at least that was what he thought was going to happen until that one day when, with just a couple days left to go before his bus-trip home, suddenly everything changed. Some guy approached him from out of nowhere, it seemed. Some guy Grape had never spoken with before, a friend of that black man that he had never dared to speak with either, and one who wasn't even a student, according to what Grape had heard. People having talked about him as being a seaman or something like that. Something strange and ill-defined.

It happened as Grape was hanging around on the porch of the old house, enjoying the beautiful late-spring weather and watching the girls go by in their shorts and tight little tops, when all at once the guy came walking up to him. Tall and strong and so good-looking, with sky-blue eyes and the curly brown hair of a young Greek God, and with an air of manliness in every gesture like someone who had spent his life among men. He came walking up and the next thing Grape knew, the guy was introducing himself. "Hi. I'm uh... My name's, uh... Gary," he said a bit shyly.

"Hello," said Grape, taken aback at being addressed by this man who had always seemed so unapproachable, as intimidating in his own way as was his black friend. "My name's Grape," he responded after a moment's hesitation.

"Yeah, I heard about ya," the big guy went on.

"Me...?" Grape could hardly believe what he was hearing. Because this guy had heard of him? This guy who everyone around there had been telling stories about, conflicting and often contradictory stories which had somehow left him with an aura of... Of what? Of a man of mystery perhaps? Of intrigue? A man who seemed almost like a fictional character come to life somehow, as though he had stepped into this world straight off the pages of a book. An adventurer and a seaman and a... A Jack London! That was it. Like some sort of modern-day Jack London.

"Yeah, cause like I hear you're headin' out for some Bibleburg place in the next couple-a days."

"Bibleburg? That's a very... It's a pretty appropriate name for the place and, uh... Did your friend make it up? Is that where the name came from?"

“My friend...?” Gary hesitated, his voice almost catching on the word. “Yeah, my friend made it up,” he soon added in a tone that hinted at unspoken emotions, at events and life-stories about which Grape knew nothing.

“Yes, that’s where I’m from...” Grape began tentatively as the other man fell silent.

Though it wasn’t long before Gary snapped back out of it. “Well, I’m headin’ out that way myself, so I figured that maybe I could come along.”

“Come along...?” On the bus? What’s this guy talking about? Saying that he wants to ride on the bus with me? Or that he... Oh, my God!! He’s not talking about hitchhiking, is he!? He can’t be!

“Yeah, cause like I heard about how you’re lookin’ for someone to come along with ya. And me, I’m on my way to the Gulf, so with that town-a yours bein’ right on the way, I figured that maybe we could...”

No! It can’t be!! He’s actually talking about hitchhiking!

“I mean, it’d be good to have company, ya know. Like on that first parta the trip, so like... You know...”

Company? Me!? What have I gotten myself into!!?

“Cause like you’re lookin’ for someone, aren’t ya? Someone to hitch with ya?”

“Me...?” Grape could barely form the word, so deep his state of shock.

“Yeah, that’s what I hear. That you’re lookin’ for someone...”

“Looking for someone...?” Grape’s mouth was beginning to function now, but he had no idea what to say. Not when the whole thing... When it was something which he had already put behind him, or at least he thought he had. Thought that he had shoved it aside as something that he would never actually have to do. Not in the real world. Not outside his imagination. Not until now when all at once he saw the whole thing come hurtling back at him. The whole... Oh, it was too much. Too much!

“That’s what I hear...” Gary seemed to hesitate once again, waiting for some sort of clear-cut answer.

“Well I, uh... I was, uh... I mean before, I uh...” Grape struggled to gather his thoughts and form them into words, asking himself what he could possibly say. Because he didn’t dare to say yes, but he didn’t want to back down, either. Didn’t want to swallow his pride. All that bravado with which he had made his announcement a few weeks earlier that he would go if only he could find someone with enough guts to hitchhike with him, and that bravado which had grown nothing but larger and louder with each passing day and each rejection he received. Each confirmation of the dawning fact that he would never find anyone willing to go, never have to live up to his words. Not until now, that is. Now when all at once... So what could he say? How

could he say no without backing down? And how could he say yes without...? Without having to go through with it! What could he...?

“Hey man, I’m sorry. I guess I musta heard wrong,” Gary began. “Cause I guess it’s not you, or maybe it’s...”

“Yes, it’s me,” Grape heard himself say at last. “I’m the one.” Though as he spoke, he couldn’t remember having made the decision to answer in that way, the words coming from somewhere beyond. Somewhere within.

“Oh good, cause like... I sure could use the company, ya know. And like... You know how lonely it can get out there on the road.”

Know? Grape know? The only thing he knew was that he had just condemned himself to... to... Not to prison or to death or anything of the sort, but to hardship in any case. To going through with that brazen and only half-thought-out plan of his. Hitchhiking all the way home rather than riding there in the comfort of a bus, walking and begging for rides all along the way, until finally he would go walking in on his parents from the... Oh, my God!! Walking in on them straight off The Road! With no cover story and no way to hide what he had just done! No way to... No! No!! Talk about a fate worse than death!

As filled with second thoughts and regrets as Grape may have been at that moment, Gary seemed to be in a completely different mood. He seemed elated and ready to go, ready to set out for the highway right then and there. Ready to go out and meet his destiny or whatever it was that awaited him at the end of the road.

And so it was Gary who did most of the talking from that point on as the two of them sat together on the porch and began getting to know each other. It was Gary who pulled out a map which he had bought somewhere and pointed out the route that he thought they should take, and it was he who shared what advice he could offer about the preparations to be made and the dangers they might face. It was Gary who talked while Grape sat mostly in silence, nodding his head or grunting his accord from time to time, lost in his thoughts as the reality of the situation slowly sank in. As he saw ever more clearly that the things this new acquaintance of his was talking about were no longer empty ideas, but instead they were imminent realities. Things that he would be facing in the next few days, and facing in the flesh! Not in his mind, not in his fantasies, but rather in that realm which people so often refer to as life. Real Life.

Gary ended the conversation at last by saying that he wanted to go somewhere-or-other, someplace that didn’t register on Grape’s brain, as distracted and lost in his thoughts as he was. And with that, Gary got up and started to leave. “So I’ll see ya here, okay? Right here. In a couple-a days.”

“In a couple of days,” Grape mumbled back. The entire lifespan that still lay before him, as far as he could see. All the time that remained until his... Oh, God!

Still sitting on the porch, he watched his new friend—or was it his executioner? He watched Gary walk away. And while his thoughts may have remained as filled with dread as ever, he had to admit that there was something impressive about that man, that future brother-of-

the-road of his. Because the guy was such a great physical specimen, walking along so tall and straight, strong yet graceful and light on his feet. And as Grape watched him recede down the street, he slowly became aware of new thoughts that were just beginning to make their appearance. Positive thoughts, confident and uplifting ones.

Because how could he be afraid of setting out on an adventure with a companion like that? What could possibly happen to him when he had someone so big and tough and self-assured traveling with him? Someone so awe-inspiring when you got right down to it, because that's what this guy was. This Jack London figure or this... This Kerouac! This guy who was so ready to drop everything and head out onto The Road. This guy who... Or wait a minute. He couldn't be the Jack Kerouac since he wasn't a writer going out to gather material. That was Grape's role in this equation. So what that meant was that Gary had to be the Neal Cassady, right? The guy who was taking the other man along for the ride and showing him the ropes. Showing him the world and its possibilities.

So okay, maybe it wasn't going to be so bad after all. And in fact, maybe it was all going to turn out for the best. Because Grape would be out there gathering material, wouldn't he? And in the process, he would be getting to know this living, breathing literary character, this Cassady/Kerouac/London character. So you know what? Maybe it was all going to be worth it in the long run. And for all he knew, he might even enjoy the trip. The new sights, the adventure, the friendship. Everything but the last part, that is. The arrival at his parents' house.

FIRST RIDE

Grape was ready to go as the fateful day dawned. He was ready but he wasn't ready, not in his mind he wasn't. And especially not after the dream of the night before. That nightmare in which Christine seemed to pop up everywhere he looked, following him around wherever he went and telling him that she had decided to go to school right there where he was. In that very same school, living in his apartment with him and spying on everything he did. And telling their parents everything, absolutely everything. An idea so horrifying that his nerves were completely on edge as he got out of bed to start his day, so easily jangled each time he recalled the dream—each time he thought about the journey's end—that he couldn't bring himself to head out the door when the appointed time arrived.

He could only hang back instead, trying to think of something else to do first, some excuse to put it off for a little while longer as he walked around and checked on everything in the apartment where he had been living, checked his backpack as well. Checked them and rechecked them and checked them again. But then even as he ran low on things to double- and triple-check, still he avoided the door, spending more and more time staring blankly out the windows while asking himself if there wasn't something else that he could do, some other way to postpone the inevitable. Like for instance, maybe he could try going to the bathroom one last time before he left. That was something his body seemed to be telling him to do given the way that his intestines would tighten so ominously each time he glanced at the front door. The way they would practically pull him back inside, away from that door.

And then as he slowly but surely came to exhaust all the delaying tactics that he could think of, as he reached the point where he was spending nearly all his time staring out the window, Grape found that his thoughts and self-queries were steadily leaving his sister and that bad dream behind. Turning relentlessly instead toward his doubts about the trip that lay ahead, and especially toward his doubts about the man who was to be his companion. Because not only was he asking himself, What the heck am I getting myself into? But he was increasingly asking, Who the heck is that Gary character, anyway? And what is he really? He says he's a seaman, but what is that? What does a seaman do? And where does he live? Like on a ship or something? Well if that's where he lives, then what is he doing around here where there are no ships? Why is he hanging out in this town? And now that I come to think of it, where is he from originally? Where did he grow up, and has he always been a seaman? Or how did he become one? And why did he become one? Why didn't he go to college like everyone else?

Grape asked himself those questions and many more, swearing that he would ask them of Gary at the first opportunity, and at the same time he searched ever more diligently for reasons to delay his departure further. Good reasons, bad reasons, any type of reasons. It didn't matter. Until finally there came a moment when he knew that this was it. The gig was up. The time for hesitation had passed, and there was nothing left to do but to suck it up and be on his way. And so with his heart pounding nearly out of his chest, his guts churning, he heaved his pack up onto his back and started for the door. On his way at last as he walked slowly but determinedly down the street in the direction of the big, old house, leaving his apartment ever further behind despite the calls from his bowels to return.

Gary was standing on the front porch of the house when Grape arrived, a small seabag thrown onto his shoulder as though he were just on his way out. And as Grape walked up and stopped at the bottom of the steps, Gary addressed him in a tone of admonishment. "Man, I was about to give up on ya. I was just about ready to get goin' without ya. And if ya didn't... Man, if you'da come here like a minute or two later, I'da been long gone."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I really am," Grape began. "But it's just that I... You know, I had a lot of things to take care of before I could come, so I... Well, I came as quickly as I could."

And with that lie, the two of them were on their way, heading off down those familiar streets as they made their way toward the highway leading out of town. Toward The Road, that place of adventure and excitement and the gathering of material for future literary output. So Grape hoped. Though when it came to filling in the blanks about his traveling companion, peppering Gary with all the questions which had filled his head back at the apartment, Grape found that he didn't dare to begin. That there was something about the big guy walking beside him that unnerved him, wouldn't allow him to ask the first question. And this in spite of the man's calm and easy-going manner. Because there was just something about him, something about that... that manliness of his perhaps, that self-confidence in the face of impending danger and hardship, or that... You know what it was? Maybe the problem had to do with Grape and his own feelings toward the guy. The string of fantasies which he had been building up in his head over the last couple of days.

And so the silence continued until the two of them had reached the edge of town, broken only by Gary's, "This looks like a good spot," as he flopped his bag down and began to

hitchhike. And as Grape quickly followed suit, setting his own pack down before taking a place by the side of the road where he stood with his thumb in the air.

Where he watched the traffic as it went by. Watched the cars, anyway. Not the drivers since he felt too shy, too awkward to look directly at any of them, those people from whom he was demanding a favor, a ride. Because it was all so new to him, so strange to be in a position like that, a beggar for the first time in his life, that Grape didn't feel right about making any sort of eye-contact.

Or at least he didn't feel right at the beginning. Not until his patience began to run thin as the seconds and minutes ticked steadily by without a response, and as he began to speak ever more forcefully in his head to those passing drivers. Hey, why aren't any of you guys stopping for us? What's going on around here? Asking questions which grew more and more blunt as the wait dragged on and on, more pressing. With the urge to challenge, to confront, to demand an answer so ever more compelling that it wasn't long before his fear of eye-contact seemed to have vanished into thin air, replaced by a far more assertive attitude. An attitude of, Hey fella, over here! How about stopping, huh?

An attitude in which Grape would stare at the drivers of the cars as they passed by one after another. Stare at the parents in family cars filled with kids and at the rednecks in their pickups and at the big-shots in their Cadillacs. All those types that even he should have known were never going to stop, as new to The Road as he was. One kid who flashed a peace sign the only positive response he got. And he especially stared when he saw a long-hair in a Volkswagen drive by. A guy who never looked back at him for some reason, though. A guy who kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead and nowhere else.

Not stopping. None of them stopping as the minutes, hours, days crept slowly by, and as the idea of giving up and heading for the bus-station kept looking better and more tempting all the time. Because how long had they been standing there? Grape asked himself again and again. It seemed like an eternity. Several eternities. And he couldn't understand why it was that nobody would stop and give them a ride, a couple of respectable-enough-looking soft-core hippie types like them, with nothing scary about them as far as he could tell. So then why wouldn't anybody stop? Why? Why!? Why!!?

And it wasn't until after the passage of who knows how many eternities—forty minutes or so by earth time—that finally a driver responded to Grape's stares. A female driver whose face lit up the moment her eyes met his as though she recognized him, so that the next thing he knew, she was pulling over a short distance beyond where they stood. Stopping to give a ride to this man she evidently thought she knew. This man who in fact she did know since the two of them had shared a class at the university recently. A class and even a bit of a flirtation, it had seemed to Grape.

"Hey, I know her!" he shouted as he picked up his backpack and began to jog in the direction of the car. And then no sooner had he reached the passenger-side window than his overwhelming sense of relief—his sense of deliverance—came pouring from his mouth. "Anne, it's great to see you!" he burst out with such enthusiasm that it must have surprised her, perhaps

even shocked her. Though at the time Grape was far too wound up in himself and his own emotions to notice anything about her reaction.

And in fact, it was only when his over-sized companion caught up with him at the car and he began the introductions that Grape ever became aware of a certain mistake which he had just made. “Anne, this is Gary. He’s a friend of mine. And this is... This is Ayn,” he corrected himself, remembering all at once how she had told him during one of their last meetings that she had decided to change the spelling and pronunciation of her name, wanting to honor her favorite author of juvenile fiction.

Ayn looked Gary over with curiosity in her eyes before greeting him and nodding her head in approval at what she saw, that big, handsome man who stood before her. And then once the two men had climbed into the car, Grape in the front seat and Gary in back, she and Grape exchanged information about their respective destinations. She telling him that she was on her way to a town which lay several hours away in the direction that the two of them wanted to go. Or in other words that they had the prospect of a good, long ride ahead of them.

Good company as well, Grape hoped as the car began revving up to highway speed, and as he asked himself what he should say next. How he should launch the conversation. Though before he could say another word, it was Ayn who spoke up with a question of her own, addressed to that tall stranger in the backseat. “So are you from _____, too?” she asked, using the official name of Bibleburg.

“No, I’m not from there. I’m just... I’m gonna keep on goin’ from there,” the guy responded somewhat shyly.

“Oh, so where is it that you’re going, then?”

“All the way to the Gulf,” Gary replied. Adding a moment later as if in clarification, “The Gulf of Mexico.”

“The Gulf of Mexico? All the way to... So why are you going there? Is that where you’re from?”

“No, I just gotta go down there so I can get me a ship is all.”

“A ship?” Ayn’s voice sounded confused all at once, as though that word held no meaning for her whatsoever.

“Yeah, cause like I’m a seaman...” Gary began.

Only to be cut off by Ayn. “A seaman!?”

“Yeah, I work on ships,” the guy mumbled back. And then apparently seeing no sign of recognition in the eyes that glanced at him through the rearview mirror, he soon made a further attempt to explain himself. “Like I sail on the ships, ya know, so I gotta like... I gotta go down there where I can get myself a ship. A job...”

“Yes, because Gary’s not a student,” Grape interjected. “He’s a seaman... You know, like Jack London or like...”

“Like Popeye,” Gary added.

“A seaman?” Ayn still sounded incapable of digesting the fact. “You’re a seaman?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“But... But... What is that? What does a seaman do?”

“Well, he works on ships is all. He just... You know, he does the type-a work that ya do on ships.”

“On ships...?”

“Yeah, you know, like standin’ watches and doin’ maintenance work and tyin’ up in port and stuff like that.”

“Standing watches...?” Ayn obviously had no idea what he was talking about. “So where did you...? What type of school did you go to?”

“Oh, I didn’t go to school.”

“You didn’t go to school?” she said as if the entire concept were foreign to her. As if it fell so far outside the realm of her previous experience as to make no sense at all.

“No, cause like they got these trainin’ places, ya know. But me, shippin’ was so easy back when I was startin’ out that I just like... I went out and learned it on the job.”

“You learned it on the job...?”

“So what types of ships do you work on?” Grape asked as the conversation between the others appeared headed toward an impasse. And also as he saw that his opportunity had arrived to ask the questions which had been on his mind earlier but which he had been afraid to ask. Because now that Ayn had broken the ice for him...

“Oh, on freighters mostly, cause that’s what I like. That’s real ships to me,” Gary came back in an earnest voice. “Not like them tankers, ya know.”

“And so how did you...? How do you get started working on ships? And how exactly will you get your next job? Do you have one waiting for you?”

“No, I just gotta go down to the union hall is all. Cause like everything goes outa the union, ya know. So I just gotta go down there and register and... You know.”

Ayn said nothing in response, her eyes on the road ahead, though Grape noticed how her shoulders had stiffened at the mention of the word union. And seeing at the same time that his

traveling companion had no qualms about answering the questions being thrown his way, soon he was pushing ahead on his own. “So how long have you been doing it?”

“Ever since I got outa high school. Cause like with the war and all that, they been lookin’ for seamen. They been hirin’ anyone they can get pretty much. Though that’s startin’ to change now...” Gary’s voice trailed off a bit ominously on that last phrase.

“Oh really? You mean it’s getting harder?”

“Yeah, it sure is.”

“So then what does that mean?” Ayn suddenly returned to the conversation, apparently starting to get over the shock of finding out that not only had her passenger never gone to college, but that he actually belonged to a union!

“I guess it means that it’s not gonna be so easy from here on out. It’s gonna get harder to get ships.”

“But you’re going to keep doing it anyway?” Ayn’s voice was taking on a harder edge.

“For now...” Gary said vaguely.

“For now? But what about the future?”

“The future? What’s that?”

“What’s that!?” Ayn sputtered as though taken off-guard. “What’s the future? You don’t know what the future is?”

“Well I mean like... What ya call the future, that’s just... Ya know when it gets here, it’s gonna be the present. Cause it’s always the present.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Ayn seemed to have no idea how to deal with this new direction in which Gary was leading the conversation.

Though as for Grape, he was intrigued by what he had just heard. Because not only was this friend of his some sort of Jack London and Neal Cassady character rolled into one, but now all at once he seemed to have become even more. He was starting to sound like... Like what? Like some type of wandering holy-man or something? Like a Dharma Bum. “So you say that the future...”

“There isn’t one as far as I’ve ever seen. Cause everything is the present, man. That’s all there is. Just the now.”

“Wow, that’s...”

“That’s hogwash!” Ayn cut in. “That’s just... It’s stupid. It’s...”

"I don't know. Ya may be right," Gary backed down quickly, showing no desire to argue the point. "But it's just that... Like I've never seen a future is all. The only thing I've ever seen is the present."

"Well, maybe you just need to look a little harder is all," Ayn was starting to lecture him all at once, the severe teacher dealing with the slow-to-learn student.

"Yeah? So like... where do I look?"

"Where do you look? You just... I don't know! You just look is all. I don't know where..."

"Cause maybe it's not there. Maybe it's nowhere," Grape answered for his friend, pushing ahead with what he took to be an advantage. And perhaps more importantly, he was also trying to horn in on a bit of the sexual tension which the argument seemed to be generating between the other two people in the car. Because he wanted to get in on some of that action. He wanted some of the attention from that gorgeous young woman driving the car.

But Ayn was having none of it as she quickly dismissed his comment and ended the discussion with a single sentence. "With an attitude like that, I can see that neither of you will go very far in this world!"

For the next few minutes the three of them rode along in silence, Ayn staring straight ahead and Grape feeling more uncomfortable with each passing moment. Feeling like he had to do something to lighten things up, something to restart the conversation on a less controversial note. And perhaps in the process, he might be able to get answers to a few more of his questions about that big guy traveling with him, he said to himself as he turned at last to the passenger in the backseat. "So how many ships have you been on, anyway?"

"There's been a few... Five or six, I think," Gary answered openly and calmly, as though completely unaware of the tension that filled the car. Sexual and otherwise.

"And where, uh... Where did they go?"

"Oh, different places... Like the Med, cause I been all over that place. And I was in West Africa one time. And like the Far East."

"Wow, that's really... So tell me, where did you go in the Far East?"

"Oh, just to Nam is all. Just there and a few-a them other places... You know, them bases they got over there."

"Vietnam...?" Grape didn't know how to take the information since the very word conjured up such strong emotions on his part. Such mixed emotions. And as he noticed the way in which Ayn had glanced into the rearview mirror at the mention of the word, he could see that it had called up strong emotions on her part as well. Though emotions whose mixture must have been quite different from his own to judge by the look of approval which had appeared upon her face.

“So that’s, uh...” Grape half-stammered, unsure how to continue. Until in the end his curiosity got the better of him. “So what’s it like over there? What’s going on? I mean really.”

“Oh, I don’t know, man. Cause like I was only ever there on a ship, ya know. And it was like... It’s only for a few days at a time.”

Grape couldn’t tell why Gary sounded so hesitant to answer. Whether it was because he was unwilling to disclose what he really thought about the war or because he was simply incapable of responding to such general questions as those.

Or to the ones that Ayn threw at him next. “But we’re winning the war over there, aren’t we? You can at least tell that much, can’t you?” she asked in a voice so earnest as to sound needy. “I mean, it’s not like what they say on the news, is it?”

“I don’t know cause like I tell ya, I never spent that much time over there. And like... I mean, it’s been awhile now, too, so I don’t know. I really don’t... And like I never watch the news anyway, so...” And then just when it seemed that Gary had said all that he had to say on the subject, he added a few final words in a solemn voice filled with some strange sense of significance, “I was gonna go back there again, ya know, but like... Well, somethin’ came up, ya know. Somethin’ came up...”

Ayn showed no interest in those final phrases of his as she let them go without comment, and she seemed completely unfazed by his failure to give a definitive answer to her question as well, as soon she was going on to answer it herself. “Of course we’re winning! Because how could we lose? Us, the United States of America! How could we lose a war to some little country like that? It’s impossible!! And it’s just that... It’s those people on the news is all. They’re the ones who are losing this war. Them and all those liberal politicians. They’re losing it, not us! Not the United States!”

Grape disagreed with everything that she had to say, of course. But somehow he didn’t feel that the time was right for him to argue the point. Not when it seemed so important to her, and not when for all he knew, she might pull over and order them out of the car at the least show of opposition. And so instead, he decided that his best move would be to change the subject at the first opportunity. To sit and wait for her to cool off a bit and then try getting back to his earlier line of questioning. Waiting until he felt that the time was right before turning to ask Gary, “So tell me, where have you been in the Med?”

And Gary? He responded in exactly the right way, whether from an awareness of the delicacy of their situation or not. Because when he answered the question, it wasn’t with one of his usual three-word phrases, but rather on this occasion he came back with a sea-story. A short but humorous tale about a grumpy captain and an incompetent pilot in some port or other in Greece. Or was it Turkey? Or Italy? Grape couldn’t remember since Gary’s first story was followed shortly by another and then another and another. So many that soon they all seemed to blend together. And as he sat there listening to story after story, there was one thing that grew ever more clear in Grape’s mind: the fact that this Gary character loved to play the role that he was playing at that moment. All the stumbling hesitation fading from his speech as he took on the role ever more fully, the role of salty-old-sea-dog-and-story-teller.

And it was only when Grape made occasional attempts to get actual information out of him rather than sea-stories that the guy would turn reticent. Answering none of the questions that had to do with his life before his first trip to sea, as instead Gary would change the subject or else respond with one-word non-replies as though he didn't want to talk about those days at all. Or perhaps it was more like he couldn't have talked about them had he tried. Like they were lost beyond all recall. And with each of those mild rebuffs which he received in his efforts to gather information about the guy's origins—he and Ayn who joined in on the questioning from time to time—Grape grew more pessimistic about his chances of ever figuring the guy out. This man he had been hoping to use as a literary model someday, if only he could...

What's he trying to hide? Grape found himself asking at one point. Is there something sinister in his past? Or is it just that... that... nothing that happened before his first trip to sea means anything to him anymore? That it's all dead and gone as far as he's concerned, and that his real life didn't begin until the day he went aboard his first ship. That could be it. It very well could, though Grape couldn't say for sure. Not with the way that the guy would become so unresponsive whenever the subject came up.

And speaking of unresponsive, Gary also dodged virtually every question that had to do with the time he had spent in town—State City as that black friend of his called it. Because the guy wouldn't say a word about what had first brought him there and very little about what he had done while in town. And when it came to his reasons for heading to the Gulf at that moment rather than looking for a ship somewhere closer by, like say in the port city that lay less than an hour's drive from town, he was every bit as unforthcoming. Every bit as evasive, it seemed to Grape, as the only reason Gary ever gave for having undertaken the current long and arduous journey was some vague statement which he repeated several times. Something about wanting to move ahead with his life rather than going backward. Just that and nothing more.

And so as the question and answer—and sea-story—period drew to a close at last, Grape found that if anything he knew even less about the guy than what he had before. That with the more he had heard from his traveling companion, the less he understood him. Unsure even as to such basic questions as whether the guy could actually be the naïve primitive that he appeared to be, or whether it was all an act. This man who was obviously not the sophisticated type, though was he really as uninformed as he let on? Like with the way that, when Ayn had asked him questions about his visits to Greece, Gary had claimed never to have heard of any of the places that she mentioned, other than the port cities. Not even the Parthenon, as the only buildings in all of Greece that he had been able to speak of by name had been a few supposedly-famous waterfront bars. So was that real or was he putting them on?

And when it came to the side-comments which he would occasionally throw out, Grape didn't know what to make of them, either. Not when the guy would say things that made him sound so wise and knowing one minute only to sound like a complete idiot the next. Jumping from Dharma Bum territory right into sheer stupidity.

It was pretty clear from the way in which Ayn's questioning had gradually fallen off until she dropped out of the conversation altogether, that she had written the guy off already. That because of his apparent mental limitations, she had lost all interest in him. This in spite of his

obvious physical assets. But as far as Grape was concerned, he wasn't nearly so convinced. Not when he couldn't tell whether the guy was stupid or whether he was playing them. Or both.

By the time they reached the Interstate and began their journey in earnest, the three of them had sunk into silence, each lost in their own thoughts as they listened to the music on the radio and watched the countryside shoot by outside the car windows. And perhaps they would have continued on like that all the way to Ayn's destination had the stupid side of Gary not made its reappearance all at once. The side that was totally oblivious to the consequences of his words and actions, as he did something so idiotic at that moment that it was hard for Grape to believe that this could actually be the same man who had shown such tact earlier on. Who whether consciously or not had gently deflected all of Ayn's outbursts, using humor and selective deafness to guide the conversation back on track whenever she had threatened to lead it off onto one of her ideological tangents.

But now here he was, this very same guy, suddenly doing something that was sure to blow things sky high. Pulling out a joint and asking for a light, saying in the process that it was a going-away present from Wolfman and that this seemed like a good time to share it.

Ayn tensed up the moment she saw what he had in his hand. "What's that!?" she yelled at him.

"It's, uh... It's... You know," Gary answered meekly.

"Well get it out of my car! I don't want it around here!" she screamed. "Get rid of it!"

At which Gary looked back sheepishly for a moment before breaking the thing in half and sticking one of the pieces into his mouth while offering the other to Grape. Shrugging his shoulders when the offer was waved off and eating the second half as well.

Refused by Grape who knew better than to get involved in something like that right then. Right there in front of Ayn. Though despite his efforts to distance himself from the incident, soon Ayn was going after him with as much vehemence as she had been using in her attacks upon Gary. He and that evil weed which the two of them had brought into her car! Her car!!

Going on and on about it while Grape did his best to say and do nothing, to sit and take it and watch the road ahead as he let her rant. He didn't answer her accusations—after all, it was Gary who had brought the weed, not him—and he didn't answer any of the ignorant, misinformed charges which she threw out seemingly at random, either. Charges against hippies and commies and liberals and nonconformists of every stripe. He sat and listened, and he took it for minute upon minute upon hour. He took it until finally he could take it no more. Finally he had to respond, consequences be damned! Because so what if she pulled over now and told them to get out! So what!!

And so as Ayn rambled along knowingly about, "I know where that stuff comes from. You can't fool me."

Suddenly Grape cut her off. "What are you talking about? The so-called communist conspiracy or what?"

“There’s nothing so-called about it!” Ayn shot back, her decibel level rising as she saw herself being challenged. “Because it all comes from the communists, you know. They use it to weaken us, and they use the money to support their revolutions.”

“They what?” Grape didn’t know how to answer such an outrageously false accusation as that. Because what could you say back to a person who made up the facts as she went along?

“They do! Because it all comes from communist countries, you know.”

“Like Mexico, you mean?” Grape said calmly, trying to poke the most obvious hole in her deeply flawed line of reasoning.

But Ayn was ready for him. “Yes like Mexico, because it’s full of commies, you know.”

“Mexico...?”

“Yes, and it’s going to be the next one to fall, too. You just watch it. First Vietnam and all those other countries over there. And the next thing you know, we’ll be fighting them in Mexico. And right here at home, too!”

“Oh come on now. You know that’s not true...”

Though evidently she didn’t know. “It certainly is true, because if we don’t stop them in Vietnam, next thing it’ll be Indonesia and... and the Philippines and all those other countries over there. And then Mexico. Because that’s their plan, and that’s why we’ve got to stop them and stop them now. In Vietnam!”

“Oh please, the Domino Theory? That’s a bunch of...”

“It’s true! It’s what’s going to happen.”

“Now you know better than that,” Grape began, turning to look at Gary in the backseat for support. Though when the man’s only reply was a blank look, Grape knew that he was on his own. “You know that those revolutions are caused by internal conditions in the different countries, and the whole idea of a row of dominoes is ridiculous...”

“Ridiculous!? Like Eastern Europe, huh? Like they didn’t fall like dominoes?”

“Well, that’s different because they were all occupied by the Red Army at the end of the war, so of course they all went communist together. They had no choice...”

“Of course they went communist!? You say it like that? Like it’s nothing that all of Eastern Europe went communist?”

“No, not that it’s nothing, but that... Well, there was nothing we could have done about it, you know. Not if we didn’t want to start World War Three.”

“Well, maybe we should have! Maybe we’d be better off today if we had!”

“Or maybe we’d all be dead.”

“Oh, you liberals! You bunch of lily-livered...” For once, though, Ayn seemed incapable of finishing her sentence. Her insult.

Because maybe something else was starting to happen right then. Maybe the sexual tension which Grape had noticed earlier was making its return, and doing so with a vengeance. With Ayn’s heart and mind drifting away from the contents of her arguments and onto the man who sat beside her, that first man she had ever met who was willing to stand up and match her idea for idea. That man of her dreams, her eyes seemed to say when she glanced his way for a second. And from what Grape was able to read from her gestures, he thought that if anything, she was thinking more about pulling over and asking him to run off into the bushes with her right then than she was about ordering him to get out.

Or then again, maybe he was wrong. Maybe Grape was letting his imagination run away with him, and it was only he who wanted to do that, only he who wanted to grab her and make mad, passionate love right then and there. Because she was so... Oh man, you know as stubborn and hard-headed as she was, still there was something about a woman like that. One so forceful and courageous and intelligent—if totally misguided.

Whatever her thoughts on the matter may have been, though, there was no mistaking the fact that from that point on, the argument between the two of them began to lose its hard edge. It began to evolve into something else instead. A dance, perhaps. A strange sort of mating-dance in which neither of them would relinquish a thing, neither would give an inch to the other as they went around and around in mock combat. Embracing and caressing each other with their repartee. Sparring back-and-forth, back-and-forth.

“You know that there were no dominoes that fell after Cuba, don’t you?” Grape asked her at one point.

“Not yet,” was Ayn’s half-teasing reply.

“But you know that they already tried to spread it, don’t you? They tried to spread it to Bolivia...”

“But they failed!” Ayn finished the sentence for him.

“That’s right, they failed.” Grape didn’t know what more to say as he looked at those well-toned arms holding the steering wheel and that movie-star profile.

“And it’s all because we’re fighting them. That’s why it failed.”

“Fighting them...? In Bolivia?”

“No, in Vietnam.”

“In Vietnam? What are you saying? That our fighting the Vietcong over in Asia is what made Che Guevara fail in Bolivia?”

“Yes, of course.”

Of course!? What a stupid... What a nonsensical... What a sexy bunch of illogical crap.

As the two of them bobbed and weaved and thrust and parried, they seemed to have totally forgotten about the big man in the backseat. That guy whose actions had sparked the entire debate. Because while at first there may have been a certain air of playing to him as the neutral observer, at least on Grape’s part, that was completely gone by now. Grape no longer caring what the guy thought or what he heard since he had become so irrelevant, so completely irrelevant. That man whose presence meant nothing to them anymore. A mere piece of baggage, with no ideas and no understanding of anything that was being said, and no role to play in that mental and emotional dance of theirs. That waltz, that vocal tango of love.

“You know it’s all because Truman let them have China, don’t you?” Ayn chided her lover more gently than ever.

“Well how was he going to stop them when the whole Kuomintang...?”

“He could have stopped them if he’d wanted to. Just like MacArthur said.”

“MacArthur?”

“Yes, because MacArthur was right, you know.”

MacArthur right? Oh, you’re so wrong, so very wrong. But you’re also... Wow!

With time they began to run low on points to argue, points for the two of them to dance around, having used up the Domino Theory almost completely and having been through the blame-game and all the rest. All of Grape’s excuses and rationalizations and all of Ayn’s outrageous charges and dire predictions. And so with the danger looming before him that their dance might come to a premature end, their verbal music fade into silence before they had reached the end of their journey together, Grape fought in earnest to prevent it. He searched ever further afield in his efforts to come up with fresh, new subject matter for the two of them to discuss. Bringing up topics about which he knew ever less, as long as they could be used to prolong the ball. Like when the name of a certain obscure writer popped into his head.

“You know what Al Johnson said about the future of communism, don’t you?” Grape asked in a casual way, using the shortened first name as a means of covering up the fact that he actually knew very little about Albert Johnson’s work. That he was only vaguely familiar with one or two of the man’s main concepts.

To his surprise, though, it was Gary the first to answer. “Johnson? I hearda that guy,” he butted in from the backseat.

What’s wrong with him? Grape asked himself. Can’t he see that he’s not wanted in this conversation? And in any case, what could he possibly know? He probably thinks that I’m talking about President Johnson. That’s gotta be the only Johnson he’s ever heard of.

“You’re talking about that commie, right?” Ayn spoke next.

Relieving him of the duty of answering his weak-minded companion. “Commie? He’s no commie.” God, she looks beautiful when she says that word. “In fact according to him, communism is going to collapse one of these days. All by itself.”

“All by itself!? That’ll be the day!!” From the tone of her voice, it sounded like the whole idea must have been new to Ayn. Though whatever the case, she obviously wasn’t buying it.

“That *will* be the day. At least according to him it will. Because what he does in his work is he takes the communists’ own theories and then he turns them around and uses them against them,” Grape said, summarizing the entire extent of his knowledge of Johnson and his method.

“But doesn’t he use a bunch of commie-talk in the stuff he writes?”

“Yes he does, but only as a way of using it against the communists. All those phrases like...”

As Grape’s voice faded out in his effort to come up with a few good communist-sounding words, suddenly Gary finished the sentence for him. “Like means of production and relations of production.”

“Right, that’s it. Means of production and relations of production.” Now how the heck did he know that? Where did he ever hear of those expressions? This guy who knows nothing about anything. How did he suddenly know something like that?

Gary added nothing more at that point, however, and the conversation might have died out altogether had Ayn not kept it rolling along. “Commie talk!”

“Yes, of course it is.” Grape was trying to recover his footing. “But what he does is he uses those ideas and those expressions to show that it’s communism that’s really going to collapse, not capitalism.”

“Capitalism? That’s another commie word.”

Wow, if he could just get her to say that word a few more times... But no, it would be better to continue with his line of thought before he lost the thread of it. And as far as the word was concerned, he knew that he could count on her to say it again whenever she ran out of arguments. “What he does is he... Like he takes their theories and then he applies them to what’s happening now. And in the end, what he says is that it’s the communist system that’s in trouble, not the capitalist one. Because the... the...”

“Cause the forces of history are against it,” Gary finished another of his sentences for him.

“Right. The forces of history are against it, so that instead of capitalism, it’s actually the communist system that’s gonna disappear... into the dustbin of history, as they say.” What the heck? Grape asked himself once again, even as he spoke. Has this guy actually read Albert

Johnson's book or what? Unlike myself and everyone I know. Does he actually have some idea of what he's talking about?

"Into the dustbin of history along with all you pinkoes." Good old Ayn, always ready with an insult to keep the conversation going.

"Oh come on now, I'm not a pinko. I'm just... I'm open-minded is all." Unlike someone else in this car, Grape added in silence.

"Right, you're open-minded. Which of course is another word for a pinko." Oh, if only she would call him a commie instead of a pinko.

"So it makes me a commie sympathizer just because I... You know. Because I've read things like Al Johnson?" he lied.

"Yes, him and all those other commies." Ah, there was that word again.

"Oh please. I already told you that he's not a commie. He just... He uses their theories to shoot them down is what. He says things like..." Like what? Grape had no idea what to say next, but at the same time he didn't want to let on that he didn't know. So that all he could do was to pause and wait for the backseat to come to his rescue.

"From what I read, it seems like what he's sayin' is that... Like the big problem with Marx isn't so much his way-a analyzin' history. It's that his predictions about the future were all wrong and that like... Well, none-a them other guys that came along after him was ever willin' to admit that fact. So like they didn't... They never changed anything about what Marx said was gonna happen to make it fit in with what's really happenin'. And instead, they just hung onto all them old ideas, and then they like..." Gary fell silent for a moment as though in search of some deep thought. "Like ever since, they been tryin' to twist everything around to make the world fit in with what Marx predicted was gonna happen instead a just lookin' at what's really happenin' in the world around em and like... You know."

"What's really happening?" Ayn sounded uncertain, undecided about whether to launch another attack or not.

"He means like the..." Grape began to dive in, but then he had to pull up short as he realized that he had no idea what the guy meant.

Had to wait for Gary to bail him out yet again. "You know, like all that stuff about the disappearance-a the middle class. Cause like Marx said that it was gonna disappear but then it never did. And there was no one come along after him was ever willin' to admit that fact, so they just..."

"Of course it didn't disappear! The Great American Middle Class."

"Right! And when ya take that stuff about the middle class still bein' around and bein' stronger than ever, and ya run it back through all the other stuff that Marx said, ya come up with

a... Like a whole different answer for the way that things're gonna come out." Gary was starting to sound strangely confident in his slow, semi-literate way of speaking.

So confident that there appeared to be a real danger of his leaving Grape behind. And doing so in front of Ayn! And so Grape felt compelled to do what he could to get back into the conversation, applying what he had just been hearing to what little he already knew about the subject at hand. "Yes, you take all those ideas of Marx's about the means of production and the relations of production, and you use them to analyze the real world instead of the one that Marx imagined we would be dealing with at this point in history, and you... you..." You do what? Grape struggled to come up with a convincing conclusion. "Well, you can see that it's the communists that are gonna lose in the end."

"Of course they will!"—The commies! Why didn't she call them commies? Why didn't she say that word again?"—"But only after we kill em all," Ayn added in a harsh tone.

"I don't know..." Gary answered before Grape could respond, sounding as though he were about to surrender once again. "All I know is what I read, and like... Well, I don't know."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Ayn came back dismissively.

But then to her evident surprise, Gary still had a bit more to say. "But ya know, some-a that stuff makes a lotta sense to me. Like the idea that people overthrow a system when they figure that they can live better with a different one, and like... Well ya know, ya just gotta look at how we live around here and how they live in them communist countries and ya can see that like... Well, if anyone's gonna get overthrown, it's them. Ya know?"

"Or killed!" Ayn remained unconvinced. "Them or us! The commies or us!" Ah, there was that word again.

"I don't know... Maybe..." Gary had evidently said all that he had to say.

And if only Grape hadn't been so obsessed right then with that beautiful, sexy driver and the spoken-word-dance which he hoped to resume at any moment, he might have taken the time to ask himself a few questions about the big guy in the backseat. Because how was it that this guy who never knew anything about anything when it came to politics, even the most basic bits of common knowledge, was suddenly such an expert on the work of Albert Johnson? This guy who could tell you nothing about the causes of the war in Vietnam or about the issues of racism or sexism in society. This guy who knew nothing about any of those things, all at once knew everything that there was to know about the work of some obscure thinker who no one with any sense took seriously. No one that Grape knew, anyway. How could his education and his knowledge of the world be so...? So uneven. So full of deep, deep valleys though sprinkled with the occasional high peak.

Grape could have asked himself those questions, though he didn't. Not then, not consciously. Not when his mind was so totally centered upon the occupant of the driver's seat. And it was for that reason that the only thing he saw in Gary's fadeout was an opportunity for him to resume the dance. The two person dance to which only he and Ayn were invited. "Maybe we should send you over there. Because as blood-thirsty as you are..."

“Blood-thirsty? Me?”

“Yeah, you’d wipe out those commies in a week. Them and everyone else in Vietnam.”

“That’s right. Cause the only good commie is a dead commie.”

Wow! Grape was back in heaven. He was reaching out for her once again, embracing her and sliding across the floor with her. Setting out on another number, another caressingly sensuous waltz. Another round in their dance of love.

And it would be hard to overstate just how completely the bottom fell out of his world when all at once, with hardly a word of warning, Ayn guided the car down an off-ramp and pulled over at the bottom to let the two of them out. Because suddenly it was over. The dance, the flirtation. The mental sex! And while Grape had already known that things were going to end in exactly that way, with him getting out and leaving her once they reached the exit nearest her parents’ house, still the abrupt arrival of the actual moment came as a shock to him. And so he sat unmoving, his muscles frozen as he looked out at the lonely, isolated on-ramp that lay ahead, thought about that lovely young lady seated beside him. And he didn’t want to get out. Not then, not ever. He wanted to stay right there where he was. With her. Forever! He didn’t want to get back to The Road. He wanted the ease and comfort and the female companionship that he had been enjoying over the last few hours. He wanted Ayn!

But he couldn’t have her, of course. Not then he couldn’t. And it was only when his traveling companion came around to lean into the passenger-side window and say thanks for the ride, that Grape ever regained the ability to speak and act. “Thanks. I really... I appreciate it a lot, and I’ll uh... I’ll see you back at school, okay?”

Making a first feeble snatch at the door-handle, when suddenly Ayn lunged at him. Threw herself upon him and wrapped him up in her arms and pulled him toward her. Their lips meeting, melting one into another. Love. Passion. Ecstasy. Grape had never felt anything like it before. That kiss, if that’s all it was. That kiss that went so far beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Left his head spinning so furiously when they finally pulled apart that he could barely find the door, barely stay upright as he struggled to get out.

“You *bet* you’ll see me back at school,” Ayn purred in her lowest, most seductive tone.

No one spoke again after that as Ayn waved goodbye and drove off, and as the two men trudged over to the on-ramp. Not until they had come to a halt partway up the ramp and set their bags on the ground, when Gary broke the silence at last. “That was a pretty good ride back there, wasn’t it? Specially for you.”

SLOW GOIN’

Grape didn’t like what he saw as he looked around on the deserted on-ramp where the two of them had been cast aside, abandoned by his new love, and his mind rebelled at the thought of accepting it as real. Because how could it be? How could his life possibly have come

down to this moment and this situation? This being stuck in such a desolate spot. Or more correctly, the place wasn't desolate at all since the land on all sides was lush and green. But what he failed to see as he scanned his surroundings were signs of human habitation, the only buildings in sight a few scattered farmhouses and what looked like a town far off in the distance, while nearer by the only evidence of human endeavor was a road going this way and a road going that way. And as he stood and stared at those lonely strips of blacktop, he asked himself again and again, Is this it? Is this The Road? The great, fabled Road. Is this what I wanted to see, what I was planning on writing about? Well, what the heck was I thinking? What could I possibly have been thinking? And what type of mess have I gotten myself into now? What am I doing way out here in the middle of nowhere, and how will I ever get home?

There was almost no traffic on the on-ramp where they stood. The cars and pickups so scarce, the waits between them so long, that before many minutes had passed Gary spoke up to voice his concern. "Hitchin' sure sucks around here, don't it?"

"Yeah..." Obviously!

"So hey, d'ya know anything about the hitchhikin' laws in this state?"

"Me? No." Of course not. How would I know a thing like that?

"Well I tell ya what. It looks like we're never gonna get outa here if we don't go up and start hitchin' at the top-a this ramp. Up where the people goin' by on the freeway can see us."

"But is that legal?"

"I don't know, man... But ya know what?" Gary added after a brief pause. "It'll be legal as long as we get ourselves a ride before any pigs come along."

Before any... any policemen come by? What were they getting themselves into now? Were they going to do something that would get them arrested? And was Grape...? Oh God! Just imagine what would happen if he were to be arrested for hitchhiking and his mother were to find out! Imagine how horrible that would be!!

Grape didn't want to go. He wanted to stay right where he was, wanted to play it safe. But then as Gary picked up his seabag and began to walk further up the ramp, Grape suddenly felt an even greater fear come surging through his body. The fear of being left behind in that deserted spot. Because to be stuck out there all alone? What would become of him then? What would he...? Oh, what had he gotten himself into? What had he gotten himself into?

Grape glanced at Gary a time or two as he followed him up the on-ramp, that guy who, while he may have looked much the same as before, big and strong as he went striding along like he owned the world, still there was something that seemed different about him now. Almost as though he had begun to go pallid in some inexplicable way. As though much of the luster was starting to wear off. And Grape didn't know if that was because the guy had lost some of that old Neal Cassady air which he previously had, that air of romance and adventure and hipness, or if it was because Neal himself was starting to lose his appeal. The entire image fading in Grape's mind in light of the harsh realities of life on The Road. And also in light of the shining memories

of Ayn which he carried with him, still fresh in his mind. Her kiss still warm on his lips, her fragrance still filling his nostrils. So present in his thoughts, his emotions even as the distance in space and time grew larger, that he had to ask himself, How could any man ever compare to her? How could any man seem anything but pallid to him now? Especially someone connected with The Road, as grey and unattractive as life out here was quickly proving to be. This life which had seemed so bright and alluring before, back when he was reading about it in books, though now that he was experiencing it first-hand, it was turning out to be so... so boring in a way. So dirty and so... so common.

And would these adventures that he was having out here ever be worth writing about? Grape was starting to have serious doubts, thinking about Ayn instead. Ayn who seemed like such a far superior subject for any future literary labors. Living with her and making love to her day after day after day. Because that was something that would be worth writing about. While this Road stuff...?

Whatever the current state of his literary ambitions may have been, though, Grape knew that for the moment he had no choice but to follow the lead of his traveling companion. No choice but to walk up and pick out a spot at the top of the on-ramp where the cars passing by on the freeway would be able to stop for them, and to hitchhike from there. The two of them standing with their thumbs in the air trying to get a ride. Grape hoping, begging all the while for someone to stop before a cop came along and... Busted!

And it was a good thing for him that police proved to be few and far between on that stretch of road, because they had to wait for such a long time in that spot. Far longer than they had waited back at State City. So long that... Oh, how could Grape possibly count all the eternities which he spent standing beside that freeway? Praying for a ride now, praying for salvation.

With the cars shooting by in an endless stream, none of them stopping while only a few of the drivers even bothered to look their way. A couple more peace signs from under-aged passengers the best that anyone did as he and his friend stood there hitchhiking for hours, it seemed. Hours and hours. Until finally a broken-down old pickup truck on its way up the on-ramp pulled over to give them a ride. A truck driven by a black man with a boy seated beside him, obviously a farmer and his son. And as Gary approached the window, Grape could hear the man say, "I ain't goin' very far, but you're welcome to ride in the back."

"Hey man, every little bit helps," Gary responded in an open, friendly tone. "Besides, we could use a change-a scenery," he added as he climbed into the back.

As for Grape, though, he hesitated for a moment. Because accepting a ride from a black man? What would his parents say? What would they...? Oh, who cares what they would say! Because this was his own life that he was living, not theirs. And he wasn't prejudiced! He was willing to accept a ride from a black man, and he wasn't going to worry about what his parents would think. Especially not when he knew that there was no way for them ever to find out. And so with that resolve in mind, Grape was soon in the back of the truck as well, rolling down the freeway in the slow lane while cars roared past them at twice the speed.

Riding along in that way for the next few minutes—five, ten, fifteen—a few precious miles in the right direction, until the driver turned down an off-ramp and came to a stop at the bottom to let his passengers out. Gary who jumped out and saluted the driver with a free-and-easy, “Thanks man, we really appreciate it,” along with Grape who did his best to express his thanks as well. Looking at the driver and smiling and nodding, though he was unable to make himself speak since he had no idea how to address a person like that. A black person, and one who at that moment, in that situation, was actually his social superior, if such a thing is possible. So that in the end, a silent thanks was all that he could offer.

Soon Grape was surveying the new freeway interchange where the two of them found themselves, discovering in the process that things didn’t look much more promising there than they had back at the last one. The on-ramp nearly as little-used as the other had been, which meant that they would be forced to risk arrest by hitchhiking on the freeway once again if they didn’t want to be stuck there forever. But at least there was one thing this new place had going for it that the other one hadn’t, and that was the fact that there was a gas-station and convenience store located over on the other side of the freeway. A place at sight of which his empty stomach began to grumble, reminding him of the fact that he hadn’t eaten lunch, or supper either, as late as it was getting to be.

“Hey, let’s go over there and get something to eat,” Grape called out, his stomach speaking for him even before his mind was aware of what was being said.

And since Gary readily agreed with the suggestion, soon they were on their way. Hiding their bags in a ditch where passing cars wouldn’t see them, as Gary advised, and then walking through the underpass below the freeway and over to the store. In through the front door where Grape began to scan the shelves, looking for all those things that a guy his age craves when he’s seriously hungry. Chips and donuts and other types of junk-food. Looking up and down the aisle where he stood, when just as he reached out to grab a package of Twinkies off the shelf, he heard a loud female voice behind him.

“You get outa here! We don’t serve no hitchhikers in here, so you get out!” And then turning, Grape saw the unattractive, heavy-set woman behind the counter staring at him as she repeated her lines. “You get out! We don’t want you in here, cause we don’t serve no hitchhikers. So get out!”

“Me...?” was all that Grape managed to mumble in reply. Standing after that with his mouth hanging open as he looked back at her, unable to believe that what he was seeing and hearing could be real. Because no one had ever spoken to him in that way before. He, Grape, the good little boy. Always his mother’s pet. And it seemed impossible that this lady’s words could actually be directed at him.

Though unfortunately they were, they most definitely were, as she continued to holler in an ever louder voice. And she only changed her tune when Gary made his appearance from around the end of a shelf with his hands full of plastic-wrapped sandwiches and other items. “You both-a ya get outa here! Cause we don’t want you in here. We don’t serve no hitchhikers!”

“I ain’t askin’ for no rides, lady,” Gary answered her in a quiet but determined voice. “I’m just buyin’ food is all.”

“Get out! Get out!!” she screamed back.

“But I tell ya, I ain’t hitchhikin’ in here. I’m just... I’m a customer is all.”

“You ain’t no customer! You’re a hitchhiker, cause I seen you two come walkin’ in here. So I know what you are!”

“Right. You know that I’m a customer...”

“You ain’t no customer!!”

“Yes I am! I’m here to spend my money is what I’m doin’.”

“Well we don’t want your money! And we won’t take it!! So you just get the hell outa here! Else I’m gonna call the police!!”

Gary said nothing more, evidently seeing that further words would be useless, and instead he stood and glared at her as she went on yelling for the two of them to leave. Coldly, silently he stared back, until all at once he raised his arms and dropped the packages of food that he had been holding, looked down and began stomping on them with all his force, flattening the sandwiches and crushing the bags of chips.

Grape couldn’t believe what he was seeing, and the woman, too, seemed shocked into silence at the sudden violence of the act. Though her silence lasted for mere seconds as soon she was yelling again. “You can’t do that!! You pick them up!” she shrieked as Gary stood unmoving, the picture of defiance. “You’re gonna pay for that, ya know! Cause you ruined it, so you gotta pay for it!”

On and on she bellowed and blustered until finally Gary cut her short. “Ya told me that ya wouldn’t take my fuckin’ money! So you just shut your lyin’ fuckin’ mouth!!” he barked in a voice so hard that it sent a visible shudder running through her body, forced her back a step from the counter. And then as Gary turned to leave, he grabbed the package of Twinkies from Grape’s hand and threw it down and stomped on it as well. Headed for the door followed by Grape who stumbled along as best he could.

Still half-stunned and as hungry as ever as the two of them made their way silently back toward their hidden bags and their on-ramp. Though it was just as they were passing beneath the underpass, out of sight of the convenience store, that suddenly Grape heard a voice coming from somewhere behind them. “Hey, wait up you guys,” yelled the small town kid who pumped gas at the station as he jogged to catch up. “I’m sorry about that, man, but ya know, she’s a real bitch sometimes, so...”

Pausing as he came to a halt before them, the kid reached into the pockets of the gas-jockey coat he wore and pulled out a couple of sandwiches, reached into his shirt pocket where he came up with a few candy bars. “So anyway, good luck to you guys,” he said as he handed

over the loot. “But I can’t stay here, cause she thinks I’m just makin’ sure that ya keep goin’, so I gotta get back there before she notices anything.”

“Hey thanks, bro. We really appreciate it,” Gary told the kid with real affection in his voice, all the anger having vanished in an instant.

“Hey, ya know... Fuck the system, right?” And with a quick bro-shake, the kid was gone.

Gary tore the cellophane open as he resumed the walk, and he downed his sandwich in a few quick bites. “They always taste better when they’re free, don’t they?” he asked, his cheeks bulging with food. “Specially when ya get em from a brother.”

“Yeah...” Grape mumbled back as he started in on his own sandwich, though the truth was that he didn’t know what he thought or felt at that moment. All he knew was that he was starving and that the sandwich tasted great. But did some of that flavor come from the way in which the thing had been acquired? Had that added anything to its delicious taste? He had no idea since the whole situation was so new to him, so completely new. The way that all at once, he was somewhere over there, somewhere on the dark side. One of the bad guys now.

And he found it all so very strange yet so exhilarating at the same time. With a new-found strength surging through his veins as he walked, the strength brought on by that purloined repast, while his mind seemed to be entering into brand new territory as well. A whole new way of being. With new thoughts and new feelings flooding in all at once, a new outlook on life. A new sense of daring. Because as Grape walked along now, as he recovered his hidden backpack and started up the on-ramp, he was actually beginning to swagger a bit with some of that good old Kerouac swagger which had only existed in his dreams before. Never in his body, never in his footsteps such as it did now as he walked up the ramp with his buddy Neal.

Why even his brain seemed to be swaggering in some indefinable way, many of the old thoughts having faded from sight somehow. Thoughts of home and family. Even thoughts of Ayn which barely raised a ripple anymore, somewhere off in the far edges of his consciousness, somewhere off in the far distant past, because suddenly all those things appeared as though scenes from a previous existence. The life of the old Grape, the wimpy Grape, while the man walking up the on-ramp now was the new Grape. The outlaw Grape. The one who accepted rides from black people whenever he felt like it, and the one who ate stolen sandwiches, too. And if they weren’t careful, he might just go out and do something even crazier. He might...

“Hey, you don’t think she went and called the cops on us, do you?” Grape asked as the two of them arrived at the top of the on-ramp and began to hitchhike.

“I didn’t see her reach for no phone,” his big partner-in-crime replied.

“No, that’s true,” said Grape. And then seizing upon that thought, he pushed back at the terror which had sprung up within him all at once. The fear that his next crazy move might just prove to be getting himself arrested.

And luckily for him, that struggle against fear didn’t have to go on for very long as for once the two of them got a ride from one of the first cars to come by. An older model sedan filled

with four or five shaggy-haired young white guys, just enough room remaining inside for the two of them to squeeze in.

“We’re just goin’ to _____,” the driver said as they got in, naming the next big town ahead. And then after a short pause, one of the others got right down to business. “Hey, you guys got any dope on ya?”

“Sorry,” Gary answered for the two of them. “I just... I don’t like holdin’ when I’m hitchin’, ya know. Too dangerous.”

“Yeah, right...”

And with that the conversation died out in an instant, the occupants of the car apparently having lost all interest in their new passengers who sat packed like sardines in the backseat. Not one of them spoke to Grape or his partner again after that, not even the guys who sat shoulder-to-shoulder with them. They never asked for a name, and they never gave one, and they never asked for a destination, either. But instead whenever one of them spoke during the remainder of the trip, it was strictly among themselves. Throwing out short phrases about their plans for the night ahead, especially about the problem of finding a way to score dope, with many of their statements followed by considerable lulls. Chances to think or simply to vegetate.

And then as the car rolled down the first off-ramp leading into town, the driver pulled over and brought that weird, wordless ride to a wordless end. Stopping to let his short-term riders out without so much as a look their way, without a goodbye as the only time that anyone spoke was when Gary threw out a quick, “Thanks,” before turning to walk away. The car and its crew roaring off without a reply an instant later.

Gary led the way over to the adjoining on-ramp, but then no sooner had the two of them gotten there than they knew that they had been dropped off at yet another bad spot for hitchhiking. Because while they could see car after car coming down the off-ramp which they had just taken, there was virtually no one going up the on-ramp. Not the one that went in the direction they wanted to go. And as they hiked up to the top of the ramp to take their chances with the law once again, they immediately saw that even that alternative held out little hope since there were so many cars using the off-ramp that most of the through traffic was over in the left lanes. Over where it would be impossible for anyone to stop and pick them up.

“Don’t look very good around here, does it?” Gary spoke up shortly after their arrival at the top of the ramp. And when Grape replied with a nod of the head, he soon went on. “So whatta ya think?”

“What do I think?”

“Yeah, about... You know, about gettin’ outa here.”

“I don’t know what you...”

“I mean, ya think we should maybe try walkin’ up to the next ramp?”

“The next ramp...? But how do we...?” Grape replied leerily. The new Grape, the old Grape? Who knew which? “You don’t mean you want us to walk on the freeway, do you?”

“A course. Cause that’s the only way we’re ever gonna get there, ya know. And it’s gettin’ kinda late, too. Gonna be dark soon, so we better get goin’.”

“But walking on the freeway? Isn’t that...? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“I guess.”

With that short phrase, Gary seemed to have said all that he had to say on the subject. And the next thing Grape knew, his partner was tossing his little seabag onto his shoulder and starting on his way. Walking along the shoulder of the road without looking back, his left thumb in the air just in case. And leaving Grape with no alternative but to follow along and thereby to add yet another crime to the ever-expanding list of misdeeds in his outlaw career: walking on the freeway.

Grape hurried to catch up with his partner before plodding along side-by-side, he on the side away from traffic. And as he looked at the sun out ahead of them, sinking dangerously low and portending the imminent arrival of night, he felt the need for a bit of reassurance. “So what’ll we...?” he began hesitantly.

An unfinished question whose gist must have escaped Gary, or perhaps it was simply that the guy preferred to answer a different one. “Yeah, there sure has been a lotta slow goin’ lately, hasn’t there? Been real bad.”

“Yeah...”

“But ya know what? It’s gotta get better sooner or later, cause it always does,” he said as though speaking from long experience—a level of experience which Grape seriously doubted. “It can’t stay bad forever.”

It couldn’t? Who said that it couldn’t? Grape was feeling very nervous about the night ahead, and that vague statement of optimism was hardly enough to comfort him. Because what he wanted right then was something real, something solid. He wanted a plan to get them out of that mess. A plan that consisted of something other than more of the same. He wanted...

As Gary spoke again, though, it soon became clear that his own thoughts were in a far different place from Grape’s. Because rather than worrying about what lay ahead, he seemed to be seeking out silver linings instead. “But ya know what? It really hasn’t been all that bad, not all day anyway. Cause like look at them sandwiches we got. And for free, too. And then like... Well, look at that hot little piece-a ass you’re gonna have waitin’ for ya when ya get back to school. Cause she was like... I mean, maybe she’s a little dinky in the head, but she sure has got some bod on her.”

Gary glanced over as he spoke, evidently looking for his partner’s reaction, though when he did so, Grape felt the urge to look away. To turn and look at the traffic behind them. Because what had happened with Ayn was none of this guy’s business, partner or not. It was something

that he didn't care to discuss. And in fact, he didn't even want to think about her at that moment. Not when they were stuck in such a god-awful place as that, a freeway that seemed devoid of good on-ramps. A freeway where they might be stuck for days or weeks or... Who knows? And to think about Ayn in a situation like that? To think about... that other life which he should be leading instead of this one. That other... fount of literary inspiration.

And Grape's spirits sank even lower, his outlaw swagger dormant if not deceased altogether, when they arrived at the next on-ramp only to find that it was no better than what the first one had been, meaning that they would have to continue on to yet another ramp. One where, as late as it was getting to be, it would be pitch-dark by the time they reached it. Though what other choice did they have right then? What else could they do if they didn't want to be stuck in that town forever?

And fortunately for them, that third on-ramp proved to be a good one at last, a place with plenty of cars entering the freeway in their direction. So that while Grape may have found the whole thing rather spooky as they picked out a spot and then stood there hitchhiking at night, at least it wasn't as bad as it could have been, the cars not going very fast on that ramp. Not like they were up on the freeway itself. On top of which there were rows of streetlights around and along the ramp, making it possible for them to see the various cars as they made their approach. To see more than just their headlights.

And so as they stood by the edge of the asphalt with their thumbs in the air, they could clearly make out the redneck-mobiles and the family-mobiles and all the others that passed them by one after another. Car after car after truck. And then after several minutes of hitching in that way, they could also make out the police car when it started up the ramp only to pull over a short distance below them. They could see the car, and they could see the occupant. Sort of. And they only lost sight of him when he turned on his spotlight and swung it around to shine it directly into their faces. Because from that moment on, all they could see was that brilliant white light.

"What do we do?" Grape whispered anxiously.

"Nothin'," came the quiet, almost casual reply. "Cause there ain't nothin' we can do."

"But shouldn't we...?"

"Only thing we gotta do is stay calm. Cause that asshole, he's just tryin' to scare us is all. He wants us to... You know, act scared and do somethin' stupid."

Act scared? Who would be acting? Because Grape was in such a panic right then, what with that blinding light and the silent inaction on the part of the cop. It was almost more than he could bear. And if it hadn't been for the occasional whisper from Gary, there's no telling what he might have done. Run off screaming? Or fainted right there on the spot? What could he have done as he saw his entire future passing before his eyes in that intense light? The premature end to his budding criminal career. The bust! And the... Oh God!! How many years did they give you for hitchhiking in that state?

"Don't worry, he ain't got nothin' on us," Gary whispered at one point. "Cause if he did, he'd already be roustin' us. So he's just playin' some little pig-game is all." And then after a

short pause, the guy continued. "Hey, I tell ya what, man. Go ahead and start hitchin' again like nothin's happenin'."

"What...?"

"Yeah, come on man. We ain't doin' nothin' wrong. So go ahead and hitch," the big man said while at the same time following his own advice, sticking his thumb into the air defiantly.

"But no one'll stop for us with him there, will they?" Grape protested feebly.

"That don't matter. Cause all we gotta do is call that pig's bluff. That's all. We just gotta show him that we got our rights and we ain't scared of him."

And then as Grape struggled to do as he had been told, dipping into his last reserves of will in search of the strength to raise his thumb, Gary repeated his whispers of encouragement and repeated them again. "He can't do nothin' to us cause we ain't doin' nothin' wrong, man. We ain't breakin' no laws. We're just askin' people for a ride, that's all."

And evidently his friend was right, as a short time later the cop brought the standoff to a sudden end by jamming his car into gear all at once and tearing out from where he had been. His tires screeching as he shot past them up the on-ramp, calling out over the loudspeaker as he went by, "Get outa town!"

"Fuckin' pig!!" Gary shouted as soon as the car was gone. "Thinks he owns the whole fuckin' world! Fuckin' asshole pig!!" Screaming out his anger and resentment, his relief and emotional release. "Like I'd wanta stay in this shit-hole fuckin' town-a his anyway. Like he thinks I'm that stupid or somethin'. As stupid as he is. Fuckin' pig!"

As for Grape, he was much too overcome to speak right then, his head swimming from the after-effects of the tension that he had just been under. And as he slowly recovered enough of his wits to begin thinking about what had just happened and what his future might hold, he found that his thoughts were being pulled in two very different directions. Toward the joy and hope of a world of freedom, a world without jail sentences and prison bars, and toward a nagging dread of what still lay ahead.

Because what other horrible things could be lying in wait for the two of them out there? he wanted to know. What other crises would they have to deal with? Or better stated, what crises would Gary have to deal with? Because Grape? He knew nothing about dealing with things like that, and if it hadn't been for his partner's quiet courage and calming whispers just now, there's no telling what he might have done in face of that cop and his searchlight. There's no telling what sort of mess he might have gotten himself into.

But Gary? He always seemed to know exactly what to do. How to handle whatever it was that The Road threw at them. Coolly and calmly and with... Or wait a minute. Did he just say calmly? What was he talking about? What was so cool about the guy right now? What was so calm about that temper of his which he was blowing at that very moment? Because as Grape thought about his friend now, there seemed to be something incongruous about his temper, something out of place. That guy who one minute would be this laid-back, quietly optimistic

dude, but then all at once something would happen. Someone would push him too far, like with that cop just now or with that lady back at the convenience store, and the next thing you knew he would be blowing up. His fighting-side coming out in full force, and coming out of nowhere, it seemed. Only to disappear again just as suddenly, just as completely.

Disappear as it did moments later when Gary's next utterance, spoken mere seconds after the last of his profane insults directed at the cop, came out in that same old easy-going way of his. Calm and laid back as though nothing had happened. "Hey ya know what, maybe things're gonna start gettin' better now. Maybe that pig drivin' off like that was a sign or somethin'."

Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. Though if the incident had actually been a sign of better things to come, that fact didn't become apparent over the next few minutes. Or even over the next few hours, as it seemed to Grape. Because in spite of all the cars that were using the on-ramp on which they stood, there wasn't one of them that would stop and give them a ride. Not one, not for hours.

Not until finally some middle-aged guy in a big, new car pulled over to pick them up. A guy at sight of whom Grape felt waves of relief come washing through him. Saved at last! he wanted to shout as he climbed into the backseat, his partner taking the front. Happy in the knowledge that the danger was behind them now as they got a ride out of town before that cop with the searchlight made his unwelcomed return. Happy and buoyant and optimistic all at once as his spirits shot upward, ever upward.

Only for the whole thing to come crashing down moments later, though, when he heard how his partner's, "Thanks for the ride," wasn't answered by any of the anticipated questions. Not by the old, Where are you going? Or, Where are you coming from? Or even, What's your name? Because instead, the first words out of the driver's mouth were, "Tell me, have you taken the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

A question which he directed at Gary. At Gary!! A man Grape knew to be non-Christian, perhaps even out-and-out anti-Christian. He was the one being asked that question which could prove to be so crucial to their near future. That question upon which the entire ride might hinge. And they needed that ride. They needed it desperately, Grape knew as he listened in suspense, wondering what Gary would say in reply. Wondering what he could possibly say without lying to the guy or else starting an argument. Insulting him and his religion.

"Well sir," Gary began in a quiet, deferential tone. "I uh... To tell ya the truth..."—No! Don't tell him the truth! Not when we need this ride!—"I'm what ya could call, uh... I'm still searchin', I guess ya could say."

"Searching?" the man responded in a tone like, So what's to search?

"Yeah, you know..."

Though apparently the man didn't know. "There's nothing to search for as far as I can see, because either you accept Jesus or you don't. Either you're saved or you're not."

“Oh, is that how it works...?” Gary mumbled as though looking for some way to deflect the question being directed at him, some way to avoid the yes-or-no aspect of it. And it wasn’t long before he seemed to hit upon a strategy. “Ya know what? That’s exactly what my friend Grape here keeps tellin’ me,” he said, pointing toward the backseat. “He says the same thing. Cause ya know what? He’s a Christian. He’s one-a them... you know, them saved-types.”

“Are you!?” the driver practically shouted as he turned and reached behind him to shake Grape’s hand, the car swerving dangerously as he did so. And from that point on, all his conversation was directed toward the backseat, all his queries and his quotations from Biblical verse. And all his attention as well, it seemed, given the way that the car kept wandering from side to side, lane to lane, practically at random as the driver turned time and again to face his passenger. The car weaving about so alarmingly that Grape prayed to himself that Jesus was really and truly watching over them, or at least that he was watching the road ahead. Something that the driver wasn’t doing.

And when it came to answering the questions which the driver threw at him, Grape found himself faced with a serious dilemma. Because while he was very much a practicing Christian, he hardly came from the same school of absolute, literal interpretation that the driver did—his parents as well. And so the only way for him to answer the questions without offending the guy was by tempering his remarks constantly. By agreeing with a lot of things with which his heart disagreed. Though whatever price he may have been paying when it came to his own spiritual honesty, at least the things he was saying were keeping the driver happy and buying the two of them mile after mile in the right direction. So that if only the driver hadn’t decided all at once to bring Gary back into the conversation...

“So you don’t get any of this? You don’t understand?”

“No sir, I uh...” Gary hesitated like he didn’t want to answer. Didn’t want to argue and didn’t want to be converted, or even pretend to be converted. And it was only after a short but uncomfortable silence that suddenly he seemed to throw something out at random as though trying to change the subject. “It’s like my friend here was sayin’ the other day when he was tellin’ me about, uh... About that... What was it? John, uh... John, chapter... thirteen.”

“John, chapter thirteen?” the driver said as though at a loss, and it wasn’t long before he was reaching to pick up the Bible on the dashboard. Turning on the overhead light once he had it and then thumbing through the book while the car swerved worse than ever. Swerved so wildly that Grape was sure that his last moment on earth had arrived.

“That’s about... It’s about Jesus washing his disciples’ feet...” The driver sounded confused as he read the book which he held spread out on the steering-wheel, hardly glancing at the road ahead.

“Yeah, you know... About keepin’ your feet clean and stuff like that...” Gary began weakly.

Only to be cut off as the driver read on. “And about Judas Iscariot! About Jesus predicting his betrayal.”

“Yeah, that’s it. He was tellin’ me about Judas.” Gary sounded more confident now.

“And what did he say? What was his point?”

“Well, he said...”

Grape wanted to step in and help before the big guy could say more, but the problem was that he had no idea what to say. And Gary obviously didn’t know, either. Not when he had so clearly pulled that chapter number out of thin air, with no idea what was in it. Not until now when all at once he was being forced to say something about it. Something logical, hopefully. Something that would make sense. And above all something—anything—that wouldn’t offend the driver.

Anything but what Gary said next. “He said that Judas was like... He was the greatest of the apostles.”

“Judas!!?” The driver shouted the name so loudly that it hurt Grape’s ears. And the next thing he knew, the guy was turning around to give a good, hard scowl to the alleged source of the blasphemy.

But that poor source, he was so confused by the rapidly developing crisis in the conversation that he once again found himself unable to speak. Unable to say a word in his own defense and entirely dependent upon Gary. “Yeah, cause like... He needed someone to turn him in, right? So he like...”

“Judas!”

“Yeah, cause like someone had to fulfill the prophecy, right? So like it was Judas who... He uh...” Gary sounded ever more hesitant. And the driver said absolutely nothing now, not a word to help him find some way out of his predicament. So that in the end, there was nothing left for the big guy to do but to finish what he had to say. Finish digging his own grave. “Like all them other guys were way too selfish. Ya know? Like all they wanted to do was to save themselves and go to Heaven. But with Judas, he was the only one who, like... He was willin’ to pay the price, ya know. He was willin’ to go to Hell so that... you know... the prophecy could be like... you know... fulfilled.”

The driver said not a word in response, but instead he sat and stared straight ahead. Looking at nothing but the road and for once driving in a single lane rather than yawing from side to side. He drove along in that way until the very next off-ramp they came to, where he pulled the car off the freeway and brought it to a stop. Turned to tell his passengers, “This is where I get off,” in a short, clipped tone. Though despite what he had said, once the two of them were out of the car, the guy drove straight up the on-ramp and continued on in the same direction they had just been going.

“Geez, that guy sure can’t take a joke, can he?” Gary mused as the two of them stood and watched the car drive off.

A joke!? Was that what he called a joke? Well it hadn't been a very funny one, that was for sure. And just look at what it had gotten them into! Look at where they were now. Stuck at another of those deserted freeway interchanges out in the middle of nowhere. And in the middle of the night, too! On top of which it felt to Grape like it was starting to rain. With a cool wind blowing, one that was much too cold for the light summer clothes he had on, while along with the wind the first drops were starting to hit him.

Oh, how could things possibly get any worse than this? Grape asked himself. Cold and hungry and soon to be wet. And then when they reached the top of the on-ramp and started to hitch, the sight of those headlights coming at them along the freeway turned out to be far worse than anything he had imagined. Far worse than what it had been back at that on-ramp in town. Because here it wasn't just spooky. Here it was downright terrifying. Those headlights coming closer and closer, only for a car—or a truck—suddenly to go shooting past at seventy miles-an-hour. So close that the wind would practically knock him down. Oh, it was awful, this mess they were in. It was... Horrible! Much too horrible for words.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: OUT TO LUNCH

Speaking as one who spent many years on The Road, I find it rather amusing to discover that a person such as the character in this story could be so frightened at the sight of cars passing by at a mere seventy miles-an-hour. So I suppose that it's a lucky thing for him to have found himself in a part of the country where people drive so slowly. Because I can tell you from long experience that there are places in the United States where people drive much faster than that. Places where seventy would be considered blocking traffic, even in the slow lane.

And the fast ones? I'll tell you how fast they can go, because I've seen them with my own two eyes. I've seen cars going so fast that their headlights are only visible for a matter of seconds before they shoot past, that being the entire length of time that it takes for them to cover the miles in which they can be seen coming. Seconds, not minutes. Not like the long, slow approach that you get when dealing with those seventy mile-an-hour slowpokes. But would you like to know which are the worst of all? Well, I'll tell you. They're the cars that come by so fast that their headlights don't show up until the same instant they pass you. Simultaneously. Lights and car. Because those damned speed-of-light drivers! They're the scary ones. They give you no warning whatsoever. Just whoosh and they're gone. And I should know, too, since I've seen them before. I've seen lots of them. With my own two eyes.

And then what was the other thing that the light-weight in this story was worrying about? The cold, wasn't it? Man, that guy doesn't even know what cold is. Not like what I do. Not like the cold that I've seen out there on The Road. Because I've seen the real thing. Cold with a capital C! None of that sissy stuff where when you spit, your saliva freezes before it hits the ground. No, I've seen it so cold that your saliva freezes before it even leaves your lips. So cold that if you don't stop spitting, you have to spend a lot of time chipping ice off your lips. So cold that when you take a pee... Well, let's not go into that right now. Let's just say that it's better to hold it in if you can, because breaking that stuff off? It can be downright painful.

But the worst of all was this one winter day when I was out hitchhiking. Because it was so cold that day! And I swear to you that everything was frozen out there, absolutely everything. There wasn't a thing moving other than a few cars. Those and myself, of course. But the strangest thing about that day was the fact that there was no sound at all. Like it was so cold that even sound must have frozen solid. Cold!! And when a driver finally stopped to give me a ride, he said something to me out the window of his car, though whatever it was, I couldn't hear a thing. I could see his lips move, but then rather than hearing words, I saw little ice-crystals come floating out the window. And it wasn't until some of those crystals began to hit my ear that I ever heard what he had to say. "I'm going to Chicago."

I swear it was that cold that day. So cold that sound itself had frozen solid. And I should know since I heard it. Or better stated, I know since I didn't hear it.

A GOOD RIDE AT LAST

Grape was feeling lost as he stood on the edge of that freeway, totally lost. And if it hadn't been for Gary beside him, he didn't know what he would have done. Because the truth was that he wanted to quit. He wanted to give up right then and there, though he had no idea how to go about doing so when there was nowhere for him to go. No town, not even a convenience store. Nothing but that strip of road where he stood hitchhiking in the dark, fighting all the while to hold onto some small sliver of hope as he struggled to hold back the fear. And as he tried to take what inspiration he could from his partner's strength and determination. His quiet optimism. His belief, his absolute belief that things were bound to get better sooner or later.

And wouldn't you know that it was just when Grape was swearing to himself that he couldn't take it anymore. That partner or no partner, he was going to quit. Going to fall down onto the ground right there and... Die!! It was just at that moment that their luck finally changed, an old pickup truck from the fifties with a small camper-shell on the back pulling over a short distance beyond where they stood. Pulling over to give them a ride.

Grape and his partner grabbed their bags and started to run. Up to the cab where they looked inside only to find that it was full already, with three young long-hairs seated side-by-side, and with the driver leaning over to speak from across the cab as they approached the passenger-side window. "I'm goin' clear to California," he said. "Stayin' right here on the Interstate. So how bout you guys?"

"We're goin' up to U.S.____," Gary answered for the two of them. "It's a little ways past _____," he went on, describing the location of the highway which would take them on the last leg of their journey to Bibleburg.

"Well then hop in. There's plenty-a room in back."

Plenty of room? Grape asked himself as he climbed over the tailgate and into the back—the camper-shell had no rear door on it. What's that guy talking about? Because while there may have been enough room for the two of them to squeeze in, it was hardly what he would have called plenty of room. Downright crowded, in fact, as there were two other hitchhikers already

seated there on the thin mattress that filled the truck-bed. And that's not to mention several bags and bundles up in the front end of the place, one of which later turned out to be yet another hitchhiker, curled up into a ball asleep.

The other passengers greeted them and made what room they could, so that soon the two of them were settled in and the truck on its way. And given the strong smell of fresh marijuana smoke which filled the little camper—a sign that they had arrived at just the right time—Grape was hardly surprised when moments later one of the guys handed a half-finished joint to Gary who took a hit and passed it on. Handed it to Grape who took a toke of his own before holding the thing out for their other new companion, a dirty-looking guy with wild hair and a strange glint in his eyes. Or at least he had what looked like a glint, though it was hard for Grape to say for sure, the light being as weak and unsteady as it was inside that camper. Most of it coming from the headlights of the cars behind them, shining in through the open back.

“No thanks, you guys prob'ly need it more than me,” the wild-haired guy said in a deep, soft voice as he waved it off.

And with that Grape passed the joint back to the first guy, a young long-hair who was so good-looking that he almost could have passed for an actor or a model out on a photo shoot where he was playing the part of an idealized road-freak. His hair and clothes mussed just so while he wore all the standard accoutrements of the time: fringed suede and beads and a headband. And it was just as the joint was starting out on its second round that the artist's model spoke up to introduce himself. “My name's Tom, but a lotta people call me Texas,” he said in a drawl that became more pronounced as the sentence proceeded. Especially so when he got to the word Texas.

Gary responded by introducing the two of them, and finally it came to the wild-haired guy who gave his name as Swamper or Stomper or Chomper. Something like that. Grape didn't quite catch it.

As Grape took his final toke and began to relax into the effects of the weed, he was starting to feel good for the first time all day. Or at least for the first time since that ride from... you know who. Warm and dry and safe inside that little shell. And knowing that he would be there for hours to come, he felt himself being wrapped ever so gently in a cocoon of comfort. Calm and happy now and ready to lay back and go to sleep. And to get that day over with at last.

So that if not for the fact that the others inside that truck weren't quite ready for peace and quiet and sleep just yet... “So where you guys comin' from?” Texas Tom asked, speaking to neither in particular.

And leaving it to Gary to respond for the pair of them with the official name of the university town which Grape and his friends always called State City.

“Oh yeah? So how long did it take ya to get here?”

“All day pretty much, cause we had some slow goin' out there,” Gary said with his usual air of understatement.

“Yeah, I bet ya did. Out there in redneck country. Cause man, this parta the country...” Texas Tom replied in a far different tone, with no hint of the other man’s understatement, but rather with a sort of dramatic build-up in his voice. Like he was getting ready to cut loose, to launch into the sort of hyperbole with which he evidently felt more comfortable. “So ya been stuck out there, huh?”

“Yeah, ya could say that...”

“Though of course there’s bein’ stuck and then there’s bein’ stuck. Cause let me tell ya, there was this one time when I got dropped off in Gillette, Wyoming, and it took me three whole days to get back outa that town. Three whole days! Hitchhikin’ all day long, too. And ya know what? When I finally did get me a ride, it was only goin’ as far as Buffalo... Wyoming, that is.”

“Wow, that’s bein’ stuck all right,” Gary went along quietly.

While just as quietly Swamper spoke up next. Speaking in a matter-of-fact tone with none of Texas Tom’s brag. “I once spent a whole week stuck in Moose Jaw.”

“Moose Jaw!?” Tom half-shouted as though he had never heard of the place.

“Yeah, in Saskatchewan.”

“Saskass-choo...?”

“You know. Up in Canada.”

“Canada!? Up in Canada?” Tom seemed to be at a loss. Trying to decide whether the guy was pulling his leg or not. Talking about a place that actually existed or just making one up.

“I always been meanin’ to get up there someday,” Gary cut in, speaking directly to Swamper.

“Yeah, it’s good up there. Real nice country. Nice people,” Swamper said mildly. “Cept I don’t recommend the hitchhikin’ too much. Specially not around Moose Jaw.”

“Moose Jaw...” Tom sounded incredulous, as though he still didn’t believe that there could be such a place.

“Yeah, you know. It’s right there on the Trans-Can, a little ways west-a Regina.”

“Regina...?” Tom had obviously never heard of that town either.

“Is it pretty around there?” asked Gary in an apparent effort to get the conversation back on track.

“Not right there it’s not, cause like that’s the plains, ya know. But there’s all sorts-a good places up there. All over that country.”

“Like where? Like east-a Regina?” Tom’s voice was taking on an openly skeptical tone.

“Yeah, I guess so. If ya go far enough east... Or far enough west.”

“Just not right there around Regina, huh...? Or Moose Jaw.”

“No, not around there...”

“Bullshit!! What a bullshitter!” Tom pounced at last. “I can’t believe that bullshit you been tryin’ to pull on us.”

“It ain’t no bullshit,” Swamper came back in a low but firm voice.

“Shi-i-i-it!” Tom drawled the word out as long as he could.

Swamper’s only reply was a slight shrug of the shoulders. Like, If you don’t believe me, that’s your problem. After which he sat immobile.

“Moose Jaw? Shit!” Texas Tom repeated after a long moment of silence. “I been to some funny places, but man... You ever hear-a that place?” he suddenly asked as he turned to look directly at Grape, the closest thing to a neutral observer in that pickup truck.

“Me...?” Grape gulped in discomfort. Me? What are you asking me for? Why are you putting me on the spot? Because he already felt uncomfortable enough as it was, like he was out of his depth in the company of all those road-hardened types. So that now being asked to choose sides? “I don’t know... I’m not sure...”

“Ya see...” Tom began only to fade out as though uncertain whether his point had been confirmed or not.

And it wasn’t until after another long moment of awkward silence that finally Gary came riding to the rescue. “Hey ya know what? We had this strange fuckin’ run-in with some pig back there a little ways back.”

“Oh yeah?” Even Tom sounded relieved, glad at the prospect of having something to discuss other than Moose Jaw. “Like what? What happened?”

“Well, it was like... It was strange cause like this pig didn’t do nothin’ really, but he just... Like he was playin’ these little mind-games on us or somethin’.”

“Mind-games?”

“Yeah, like he was shinin’ this light in our eyes, and he’s just sittin’ there in his car. And he’s not sayin’ nothin’. Just like... Like he’s tryin’ to freak us out or somethin’.”

“Yeah? And he didn’t roust ya or nothin’?”

“No, he just sat there. And then finally when he’s drivin’ away, he says, ‘Get outa town,’ over the loudspeaker.”

“Yeah...?”

“Yeah that was it. That’s all he said. Just, ‘Get outa town.’”

“Wow, that’s a real asshole for ya! That’s a real pig... But he didn’t roust ya, huh?” Texas Tom said this last phrase with the same tone of build-up which he had used before, like he was about to come out with a story of his own. Or perhaps with several stories. “Cause I tell ya, man. I been roused by the best of em. I been roused and hassled and harassed and you name it. By pigs and by townies and like... Well, I remember this one time...”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: STILL OUT TO LUNCH

I hope you don’t mind if I interrupt the story once again, but I think it might be a good idea for me to offer a short explanation of one of the terms which a character in the story has just used. The term townie which is a rather pejorative way in which people on The Road sometimes refer to the local, sedentary population of the towns through which they pass. Those denizens of small- and medium-town America who, while they may not be objects of hatred or even distrust in every case, still there are always a few of them in each town who fully deserve the epithet. Deserve to be called townies just as much as certain policemen deserve to be called pigs.

And the truth is that townies of that sort often constitute an even greater danger to people on The Road than do the police, a fact of Road-life which I think is well illustrated by an incident that occurred to me a number of years back. It was an incident that took place in... a town which shall remain nameless in order to protect the innocent.

I rode into that town on the BN, the Burlington Northern. And being that it was daytime and that the train would be breaking up there, not continuing on in my direction for a number of hours, I decided to walk to the edge of town and there to continue my journey by thumb. But then it was just as I was leaving the railroad yard that a group of under-aged townies—a group of local children, as they are generally called—evidently mistook me for a hobo. Someone they had a license to harass. And the next thing I knew, there were rocks flying at me. And not just a few of them either, but a whole hail of rocks.

Now normally I’m the sort of person who would turn the other cheek in a situation like that, though given the number of rocks that were coming my way, I didn’t see that as a viable option on that day. And so what I did instead was to reach down and pick up a rock myself and then throw it back at one of those little brats whom I could see on the hill above me. Beating him on the first try, of course, given the arm that I have, and sending that little sucker running home to his parents with a welt on his head that would be there for the next week or so. An instant later all his vicious little buddies followed suit, all of them ran off in a pack in their wounded friend’s wake, so that finally I was able to breathe a sigh of relief as I turned to continue my journey in peace.

To walk along undisturbed over the next minute or two, in any case, though it wasn’t long before I began to notice how townies were suddenly starting to appear on all sides of me. Parents and friends and friends of friends. So many of them coming from so many different directions that escape was clearly impossible despite my blazing speed. Because with the entire

population of that town coming after me, there would be nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide and nothing to do right then but to stop and await my fate.

A number of the townies were openly hostile and aggressive as they came swooping in upon me. Especially the one I took to be the father of the injured child, as he and a few of the others took several cheap shots at me, hitting me and slapping me, ripping the bedroll from my hands and tearing at my clothes. But then before they could go any further in that direction, a man with a certain air of authority about him spoke up all at once. "Wait a minute, you guys. Wait a minute. Let's give this guy a chance," he told the fast-growing mob, using a phrase which I found rather heartening, given the alternative. Though I didn't much care for the ominous words which came immediately after. "And let's have a little fun, too."

Soon the man was explaining the plan which he had in mind. One in which they would give me a short head-start before all of them came after me, with the first one to catch me winning the prize of being allowed to make the "kill," as he phrased it. Employing an expression which didn't sound terribly appetizing from my point of view, though when it came to the townies' reaction, they seemed to love the whole idea. Love it so much, in fact, that it was only a matter of seconds after he had finished speaking that parts of the crowd were starting to move aside, opening a pathway for me to begin my run-for-life.

Offering me one slim chance at survival which I quickly seized as suddenly, without warning, I took off running at full speed. Running so fast that they must have been shocked when they saw how swiftly I left them all behind, even their fastest runners. Though at the same time, I'm sure that they must have known as well as I did that speed alone couldn't save me that day. That through sheer numbers—and through the use of their cars—they were bound to catch up with me sooner or later. So that if I wanted to get out of that thing with my life, my only chance would be to fool them somehow, to find a hiding place somewhere. Anywhere.

Though how exactly do you go about doing something like that when you're busy running for your life in a strange town? How besides hoping for a stroke of luck such as the one that soon came my way on that fateful day. Because as I rounded a corner near the edge of town, at a spot where I was temporarily out of sight of my pursuers, my eyes lit upon a big eighteen-wheel truck that was parked there. The perfect spot, I said to myself as without a second thought I dove beneath that truck and then climbed up along the bottom of the chassis as far as I could go. So far off the ground that even if the townies were to get down on their hands and knees, they wouldn't be able to see me.

Completely invisible as they searched in vain, according to everything that I could hear from my uncomfortable little perch. Some of them stooping down to look underneath the truck, it sounded to me, while others wandered about here and there, and while all of them said again and again, "Where did he go? Where could he have gone?"

And they were still repeating those phrases, still stymied in their quest when I heard the driver return to the cab of his truck some minutes later and fire the thing up, jam it into gear and then go driving out of town. Up onto the freeway as I dangled precariously beneath, holding on by little more than my fingernails while the road shot by just below me, the drive-shaft spinning

furiously mere inches from my face. But in spite of all that I hung on and hung on. All the way to another town. All the way to my preservation.

And speaking of other towns, that wasn't the only time that I ever found myself faced with a mob of hostile townies, because it happened to me on another occasion as well. It happened in... another town which shall remain nameless.

I won't go into the details this time about how exactly I got myself into that situation, though suffice it to say that I eventually found myself being pursued by a truly blood-thirsty pack of townies on that day. People from whom I could expect no quarter if captured, so that my only hope was through the use of my legs. But the trouble with that strategy was the fact that the town in question had a rather strange layout to it, being filled with dead-ends and roads which wound back in directions that I didn't want to go. And that's not to mention the fact that I couldn't find a decent hiding place anywhere.

And so all I could do that day was to run and run. Turning at one point to see three or four townies coming at me, all of them armed and ready for trouble, as I quickly ducked down a side street to the right and then ran even faster. Followed that road only to find that it curved around and led me straight into another group of three or four. Also armed to the teeth, also with murder on their minds. So that my only option was to turn back and run in the direction of the first group, back until I came to a small road which I had by-passed earlier on thinking that it would lead to a dead-end. Lead as it unfortunately did, straight into a roadblock where I soon found myself stranded. Trapped at the end of the road while those groups of armed men came ever nearer. Some of them with clubs and some with rifles, lowered and ready for use.

But I wasn't ready to give up just yet. I wasn't ready to die. And so an instant later I was starting off again, hopping a fence on one side and then running through someone's yard before hopping another fence, all the townies following my lead as I went. All of them and more as they seemed to appear in greater numbers all the time. With groups of them soon showing up on both sides of me as well as behind, so that I was left with no other choice but to keep on going. Keep running and running in the same direction. Running and running until...

Suddenly I came to a cliff. A sheer drop-off of hundreds of feet. With no way to continue on. No escape! And with those lethal hordes of townies coming closer all the time. Their guns pointed at me, their trigger fingers itching like they were ready to fire at any second. Ready to mow me down. And do you know what happened next?

They killed me!! Ha, ha, ha.

AS I WAS SAYING

I'm sorry, but due to the interruption we seem to have missed out on quite a bit of the conversation which took place in the back of that pickup truck. And while it would be possible for us to rejoin the discussion in mid-program, I think it might work out better in the long-run if I were simply to summarize it for you instead.

As you may have guessed by now from what was said earlier, the talk that night was dominated by Texas Tom who regaled his fellow travelers with story after story from his life on The Road. With some of those stories being true perhaps, while others appeared... exaggerated, shall we say. Though no one in the truck ever challenged him on that point, Gary much too generous and open-hearted to call another man a liar, while Swamper appeared a bit gun-shy. Chastened by the Moose Jaw incident and hesitant about confronting Tom again. And so as Tom slowly became aware of the fact that his stories weren't going to be questioned no matter what he said, not as to their veracity nor as to his own king-of-the-road credentials, he took them to ever greater heights of outrageousness as time went by, and he told those stories with ever more drama as well, more flair.

Swamper, who apparently held no grudge, chuckled louder all the time as the stories edged steadily toward the ridiculous. And in fact, he seemed to enjoy the performance so much that whenever Tom showed signs of flagging or running out of stories on a particular subject, Swamper would feed him just enough lines to get him going again. Enough to send Tom right back into high gear.

Gary, too, did little more than listen and laugh along, though on the occasions when he spoke up and offered commentaries, he did so in terms that seemed to imply a far greater familiarity with life on The Road than anything Grape had given him credit for. So much greater as to leave that young man scratching his head, asking himself, Could the guy be faking it? That didn't seem very likely given everything else that he had seen and heard. But then what other explanation could there be? Could it simply be that the subject had never come up before? Or that Gary was so fond of telling sea-stories that he had never gotten around to any road-stories earlier on? That could be it. Especially so in light of his attempts to interject a few sea-stories into the present conversation. His unsuccessful attempts as they turned out to be, interrupted and cut short by Tom on each occasion despite Swamper's expressions of interest. Brushed aside and ignored by that self-declared master story-teller among them.

During the entire time that this was taking place, Grape said not a word to anyone, as instead he sat in the comfort of that old camper and listened to those tales of Texas Tom's. Telling himself that here was some great material for any future literary output of his—if he ever got around to writing about The Road, that is. Here was a treasure-trove of stories that could be put to use someday. And whether the stories were true or false or exaggerated? What did that matter when they had such a great Road-flavor to them? On top of which there were so many of them, dealing with so many different aspects of life on The Road that if only he could remember them all, he would have enough material to last an entire literary lifetime. With no need ever to return to The Real-Life Road again.

Though as he sat and thought about it now, somehow life on The Road didn't seem nearly so bad anymore. Not like what it had before this ride. Because now he was finally seeing that there was a good side to go along with the bad side of this life which he had seen during so much of the day. That world of long waits and short rides. That flip-side of this world which he was experiencing now as he sat warm and safe, sharing the company of these... Did he dare to call them his brothers-of-the-road? Gary perhaps, and maybe even big-mouth Tom, and... Sure, why not? Swamper as well. His brothers in this greatest adventure of his life. His brothers on this Great American Road down which he was traveling.

And so as Grape lounged back as best he could on his small section of mattress, watching and listening to those three companions of his—those three brothers— it wasn't long before he began to ask himself if maybe one of them could be the man he had come out onto The Road hoping to meet. The real, true Dean Moriarty come to life. Like for instance, was it Tom with his Texas swagger and his endless stories? Was he the “real thing?” Or what about the soft-spoken Swamper? It was hard to tell with him since he was saying so little about his own adventures. Almost nothing, in fact. Though hadn't he been to Moose Jaw? Hadn't he hitchhiked across Canada as well as the United States? That had to count for something, didn't it? It had to make him some sort of “real thing.” And then there was the question of Gary, the least experienced of his three road-brothers, he thought, though the matter was hardly clear in his mind anymore given what he had been hearing over the last half-hour or so. And whatever the guy's true level of experience on The Road may have been, at least he had managed to bring the two of them this far, hadn't he? Through thick and a whole lot of thin. So yes, he was... not Dean Moriarty perhaps, but at least he was someone who belonged in that same ballpark. Like a relative or something of the sort. Dean's sea-going cousin.

Grape grew sleepier and sleepier as Texas Tom rattled on with his stories, and he struggled to find storage space for them in his ever cloudier brain. He fought to stay awake until finally he could fight it no more, had to stretch out as best he could in the limited space available and doze off. More or less. His mind entering into some strange netherworld, half dreaming and half awake in the constant noise and vibration of the moving pickup truck. Half aware of the passage of time and half oblivious.

And then it was just when the motion came to an end at last, just as he was finally starting to enter into the world of sleep for real, that he felt a hand shake him gently. Gary's soft but insistent voice speaking to him at the same time. “Piss call. Time to get up.”

“What...?”

“Come on man. Time to go use the head. This is your chance to take a pee. And ya can get yourself a drinka water here, too.”

Water? What was he talking about? Grape had no desire to take a pee, and as far as the water was concerned... Or wait a minute. What was that strange feeling he had in his throat? Was it... thirst? He didn't know. But whatever it was, it wouldn't allow him to go back to sleep now that he had become aware of it. Because when was the last time that he'd had anything to drink? he asked himself. It had been so long that he couldn't even remember. Or for that matter, he couldn't remember when he had taken his last pee.

Grape was soon up and on his way toward the men's room of the gas-station where the pickup had stopped, joined there a moment later by Swamper who, when standing and walking about in good light, was hardly as striking as Grape had taken him to be back in the camper. Because the guy wasn't very big, kind of scrawny, in fact, and his clothes and general appearance were more shabby than Road-romantic. Dusty and disheveled and unwashed. And then what about Texas Tom? Grape didn't get a chance to find out since Tom had answered Gary's calls with a, “Fuck off! Leave me alone.”

As Grape looked around, he couldn't find a drinking fountain anywhere in that gas-station, soon returning to the men's room sink to try drinking from his cupped hands. Spilling far more than what he managed to drink, until finally his big friend came to his rescue yet again. Walked in with an old bottle in his hand, filled it up and refilled it and filled it again as the two of them drank the water down. As Grape quenched that thirst which had been building up all day long without his ever having been aware of it.

"Hey man, ya wanta sit up front?" Gary asked as they were on their way back to the truck. "Them two guys that were sittin' up there got out a little ways back."

"Up front...?" Grape said weakly. Up in the cab where he wouldn't be able to lie down? Wouldn't get a bit of sleep during the rest of the night? "No. No thanks."

Gary didn't say another word after that, simply nodded and headed off in the direction of the cab. And it wasn't until Grape was climbing over the tailgate and back into his shared bed that he heard the guy's voice again. "Hey man, I'll keep ya company," the big man said. To the driver, evidently. Followed moments later in more muffled tones by, "I tell ya what. I'll buy ya a cup-a coffee at that diner over there if ya want."

Grape was soon stretching out on the thin little mattress, taking up all of Gary's space that Swamper hadn't already occupied. Soon hard asleep for the first time as the pickup sat in the parking-lot of the diner. And he was only vaguely aware of the moment when they got underway once again, his sleep only briefly disturbed, after which he was conscious of nothing more until daylight. Not until the sound of a voice made him open his eyes to the already-bright morning light.

"Man, I gotta pee like a race-horse!" said Texas Tom in a loud voice. "Doesn't this guy ever stop? Doesn't he let anyone take a piss?"

Grape said nothing as he sat up and looked around. At Tom who swayed nervously back and forth, repeating his words from time to time, and at Swamper who sat looking stoically at the world behind them, and at some other guy, too. A kid that he hadn't seen before, sitting up in the front part of the camper with a dazed expression on his face. A young kid who looked even greener and newer to The Road than he was himself, if such a thing was possible.

"Hey man, ya mind if I use this?" Tom asked all at once as he spotted Grape's water bottle and, grabbing it, slid over to pour the contents out onto the road behind them.

"Use it for what?" Grape asked meekly. Until suddenly it dawned on him what exactly the guy meant. "No!" he shouted back an instant later, speaking with a force in his voice that surprised even himself. A force that stopped Texas Tom in his tracks.

"Come on man. I need it," Tom began to beg.

Until Grape cut him off cold. "That's my drinking bottle! You can't pee in there."

"No...?" Tom sat indecisive after that as Swamper and especially that young kid looked at Grape with... With what? With an air of deference, it seemed to him. Respect for this guy who

knew how to take care of himself out there on The Road. Knew how to stand up for himself in a world of men. Real men. And his moment of glory was only cut short when Tom suddenly scooted over and started pounding on the front of the camper-shell with his fist. Pounding as hard as he could until finally the pickup pulled over onto the shoulder and came to a stop, Tom springing out so quickly that he was already out of sight around the side of the camper by the time the driver came around on the other side to see what was wrong.

Tom made his return a short time later, and then as the driver turned and began to leave, suddenly Grape spoke up. “Hey man, is there still room for one more up front?” he asked. The new Grape asked. Blazing with confidence now as he asserted himself in a way that he never had before, though as he would again and again in future, he knew. Because this time he was sure that it wasn’t going to be just a temporary appearance of the new him such as it had been the day before in the afterglow of eating that stolen sandwich. No, this time it was the emergence of the new Grape for real. A permanent condition. With the confidence, the outlook, even the strut of a man who knew that he had proven himself all the way. Shown that he knew how to fend for himself in a hard-knock world.

And so it wasn’t long before Grape found himself seated on the wide front seat between his old friend Gary and his soon-to-be-friend Greg. The driver. His brother-of-the-road as the guy quickly proved to be, responding to questions with road-stories. Tales of his own adventures back in the days before he bought the old pickup truck which he was presently driving, back when Greg had been a hitchhiker himself. And as Grape listened to those stories, far tamer than anything he had heard from Texas Tom though also more believable, more authentic, he began to think that perhaps he had found the “real thing” at last. Dean Moriarty in the flesh. The living, breathing incarnation of that literary icon. So that if only there had been a little more time for him to get to know the guy, if only those stories could have gone on for a little while longer before they arrived at the exit where he and Gary had to get out...

“Good guy, huh?” was all that Gary had to say as the pickup truck pulled away and the two of them began to walk toward the highway that would take them to Bibleburg. Just that. Just, “Good guy.” That was all the insight that Gary had to offer into the character of that man with whom he had spent so much of the night, and one who could have been... What? The very person that Grape had been hoping to meet ever since he first began to fantasize about heading out onto The Road? The source he had been seeking? The model for the character which he hoped to create in his writing someday? He didn’t know. He couldn’t be sure. Not then, not ever.

Not as he led the way over to a small diner near the junction, the new Grape taking the lead now from his somewhat passive partner, and not as the two of them sat fortifying themselves for the journey ahead. Because in spite of his best efforts, he was unable to gain any further insight into Greg and his character. None into Gary’s character either, for that matter. Not with the way that the guy would deflect his most probing questions, joking about them or changing the subject. And Grape had no qualms about asking what was on his mind anymore, not like what he previously had. Ready to ask all those questions which he had been meaning to ask since the beginning but had never dared. Ready to demand answers, had the big guy only been ready to provide them. Capable of providing them.

In a sign that their luck had truly changed from the day before, they got a ride soon after they resumed their hitchhiking, Grape climbing into shotgun of a late-model car whose driver told them that he was going all the way to Bibleburg, all the way past it. And then as driver and passengers began getting to know each other, Grape quickly discovered that their new companion was yet another brother-of-the-road, though one of a different variety from those they had met earlier. Because he was an older guy, one who claimed to have hitchhiked all over the country back when he was young. Back in the forties. And he told them that he still stopped for nearly every hitchhiker he saw, his heart still somewhere out there on The Road.

And perhaps it was for that reason that as the three of them sat and talked among themselves, Grape and the driver doing most of the talking while the big guy in back contributed a line here and there, the conversation inside that car quickly took on a strangely fraternal air. A get-together among brothers, true brothers despite their obvious differences. And whenever the driver spoke to Grape, asking him questions or making comments, the man's tone seemed to imply that he took his passenger to be every bit the long-experienced denizen of The Road that he himself had once been. Addressing him in a way that Grape found to be so highly flattering that it was almost like he was being presented with a badge of honor each time that the driver spoke. Recognition being made of the fact that in little more than a day, he had already proven himself on The Road. Already become a man among men. And as that perceived praise entered his ears again and again, went straight to his head each and every time, soon Grape was pulling out all the stops. Playing his part and playing it to the hilt as he spoke with the same sort of quiet knowingness which he had learned by then to be standard fare among road-freaks, the same sort of nothing-can-surprise-me-anymore. Until finally at one point as the ride wore on, he even dared to tell the driver a road-story of his own. His very first. He told about the cop with the searchlight, investing his little tale with all the drama of which he was capable and telling it in a way that surely would have made Texas Tom proud. Leaving out only the embarrassing parts, those about his fear, his trembling, as instead he made himself sound every bit the stalwart that his big companion had been.

And oh, how Grape loved to play the role that he was playing at that moment. How he loved to show off what he had so recently become: a hardcore road-freak if ever there was one. All the way. Forever. So that as he saw himself being taken seriously on that very same level, his newly-won status being accepted unquestioningly by the driver, it was all so... so... It was glorious! So fantastic that his feet seemed to float several inches off the ground when he climbed out of the car at last. When he and his partner were dropped at an off-ramp that lay within a mile or two of his parents' house.

His parents' house!!! He was almost there! He was almost home!! Back at the home of the old Grape, the wimpy Grape. Back at that place where the new Grape was about to go walking in and...

Oh God! What was he going to do? He couldn't just go barging in there like this, could he? Fresh off The Road. And then what about Gary!? How would he ever explain that big guy's presence to his parents? How? How? "When we get there, don't say anything about being a seaman, okay?" Grape said as they walked along. "Tell em that you're a student."

"Okay, sure."

“And tell em... Don’t say anything about hitchhiking either, okay? Tell em that we came here by... I don’t know. Tell em we... Just say that we got a ride from a friend, okay? Cause that’s not exactly a lie, is it?”

“Yeah, whatever ya say...”

“And tell em that you’re studying... No wait a minute. We can’t talk about religion with that type of stuff you say, so we’ll just... Oh hey, I’ve got it! Tell em that you’re Jewish, okay? And that you’re studying... No, wait a minute, that won’t work. Cause I don’t think they like Jews either. So...” On and on Grape babbled. The new Grape quickly wilting and withering away as the distance to his parents’ house grew shorter. The bold Man Of The Road shrinking and shriveling up into the timid little boy. The old Grape once again.

And he was only saved from further humiliating himself in front of his friend when Gary spoke up all at once. “Hey I tell ya what, man. Maybe I should just keep on goin’, ya know. Cause like I still got all this daylight...”

“Keep going...?” Not come to the house? Not come over and meet my parents? And be cross-examined by them! Not force me to lie to them about you and about...? “Okay. If you think it’s best.”

“Yeah man. It’s the best.”

“Well, okay then...” Yes!! I’m saved!! I have one less burden to carry. One less thing to lie to my parents about when I get home.

And so with that, the only thing left between Grape and his friend was the goodbye. A goodbye which Grape might have made into something had his mind not been so preoccupied right then with his fast-approaching arrival at home. And had Gary not been such an undemonstrative type, simply shaking hands with him brother-style while saying, “I’ll see ya round, huh? Maybe.”

“Yeah sure, I’ll see you around,” Grape repeated as his friend turned and walked away. Never to be seen by him again.

Grape was soon on his way as well, his thoughts so centered upon his parents and the story he would have to tell that he never even bothered to look back. Never gave another thought to his recent traveling companion—his brother-of-the-road of the last two days—walking off in the opposite direction.

That person he hadn’t managed to figure out at all, he had to admit that fact to himself. That the more he had gotten to know the guy, the less he had understood him. A problem which wouldn’t prevent him from using Gary as a literary model in the future, however. Wouldn’t prevent him from revisiting their brief friendship time after time over the years to come and using that Jack London/Jack Kerouac character in his books and stories. Filtering what he could remember about the actual person through his own literary imagination and then making him the central character of so much of his work. Even going so far as to attempt taking on the guy’s entire persona on certain occasions when he wrote in first person. So that in the end, Gary could

be considered to have been an even greater source for Grape's work than was his first—and third—wife Ayn. Because while Grape may never have returned to The Road again after that brief but eventful journey, he spent many years mining his experiences from those two days. Writing several books in the process, each of which contained a character closely resembling Gary, as the man is being called in this particular book of his. Of mine.

PART IV

EMOTION

In which the subconscious and the involuntary systems of the body react to that which has been named and recalled.

ENTER GABRIEL

Like so many others of his generation, Gabriel grew up dreaming of being a cowboy. Though unlike the others, he never dreamed of being the hero. He didn't want to be Roy Rogers, not when the guy seemed so boring in a way, so serious and so straight-laced. He wanted to be the colorful side-kick instead. The funny guy, the one who knew how to go out and have a good time. He wanted to be Gabby Hayes. And so when someone explained to him one day that Gabby was a nickname for Gabriel, from that day forward he insisted upon being called Gabby.

Gabby grew up under difficult circumstances, to say the least. He came from a family so broken that it could hardly be called a family at all. His father left when he was young, and while the man didn't disappear from his life altogether, that might have been better than what he actually did. The way that he would come by to visit every few months, always showing up drunk and there for the sole purpose of borrowing money from his ex-wife. Enough money to buy himself another bottle of booze or enough to pay back the bail money which he had borrowed from someone else.

Because Gabby's father was frequently in and out of jail, going there mostly on charges having to do with drunk and disorderly. Passing out on the street or getting into drunken brawls or mouthing off to the wrong people. The police. And of course he never had enough money to bail himself out since he was incapable of holding a job for more than a few months at a time, so that instead he would have to get the money wherever he could. Through begging and borrowing or through what could be called petty crime, though in truth the crimes which he committed were of such a low caliber that it is almost an insult to the petty criminals of the world to use that expression. To call them anything other than what they actually were: the small-time acts of a loser. A no-good, low-down, drunken loser.

And Gabby's mother? She was even worse, if such a thing is possible. Worse in the way she treated him. Because at least his father used to show him a bit of alcohol-fueled affection when he was around, unlike the emotional deep-freeze which he always got from his mother. Her insistence upon pointing out to him time and time again that he was an accident, a mistake. The greatest mistake of her life. And that the only reason she was putting up with him was because she had no way to get rid of him.

And it certainly wasn't that she didn't try. Especially on those occasions when she had a new boyfriend moving in, which was frequently. But the problem she kept running into was the

fact that she had no relatives who were willing to take the boy in. So that after a week or two spent living at the home of some aunt or uncle or cousin, he would be sent back with a thanks-but-no-thanks. And then when in desperation she would turn to her own mother, that was even worse as far as Gabby was concerned. Because his grandmother never made any bones about the fact that she didn't want him around, that she would just as soon never see the little brat again. And whenever she was forced to take him in for days or weeks or months at a time, she would treat him so harshly and with such emotional cruelty that he actually preferred the time he spent in foster homes to the time he spent with her. Those foster homes which he kept running away from though he didn't know why since his home life was so horrible. And in fact, Gabby even liked it better in juvenile hall than he did at his grandmother's house since at least when he was there, he had friends around. Friends of a sort. The type you make in lockup.

And Gabby spent a lot of time locked up when he was young, as you might expect given his family background. But while he was frequently in trouble with the law, he was never a bad kid. Not really. He was never bad-hearted. He was just a kid who had been neglected and abused his entire life so that sometimes he acted out. Sometimes he did things that society considered to be wrong, though he never did anything truly evil, as instead the things that kept getting him into trouble came all too often from his desire to please. His attempts to show off and impress the other kids by doing whatever it was that they asked him to do. Whatever they dared him to do, consequences be damned. And it was thanks to that willingness on his part to accept any and all dares that over time he developed quite a reputation for himself along those lines. A reputation as the kid who wasn't afraid to do anything no matter how crazy, no matter how dangerous or how illegal. Because if the other kids wanted him to do it, then that was what he was going to do. And if he got caught? He didn't care. He was ready to take the risk as long as there was some chance of a reward. Some chance of winning the approval of those other kids. Their praise, their friendship.

Because what Gabby wanted more than anything else in the world was a friend. Or to be more specific, he wanted a brother. Someone to be there for him in the same way that the other kids' brothers were there for them. Someone to stand up for him when he needed the help and someone to share his life and care about the things he did. Someone to care whether he lived or died. So that if only there had been some way for him to have a brother, a real brother... Or maybe even a sister though it wouldn't have been the same thing, not really. But someone, he needed someone. Anyone!

He never got his wish when he was growing up, though. His mother never had any more kids. She never made that same mistake again. While when it came to the sorts of deep and abiding friendships that he so craved, Gabby was always too much the bad kid to attract any of the good kids that he met, too good-hearted to bond with the bad kids. So that in the end he grew up lonely. An involuntary loner. Eternally in search of that lost brother, that friend and companion that he should have had if only there were such a thing as justice in the world. If only wishes were ever granted.

Gabby didn't finish high school. He had been suspended so often that he probably couldn't have done so even had he tried, not in the allotted length of time. But in any case, he didn't want to finish. What he wanted instead was to get away from there as soon as possible, to leave that so-called mother of his once and for all and to strike out on his own. Out into the

world where he would be able to make a whole new life for himself. A better life, he hoped. Better than the one which he had been dealt as a child.

With as little education as he had, Gabby was forced to start at the bottom when he first set out, picking fruit and washing dishes and pumping gas. Any low-paid, undesirable job that he could find, as long as it was legal. Because whatever else he may have been, Gabby was no criminal, and the last thing he wanted to do was to follow in the footsteps of so many of the kids he knew from juvenile hall, graduating from there only to move on to adult prison. Because that wasn't for him. That wasn't what he intended to do with his life. He wanted something better instead. He wanted a real life.

As Gabby grew older and gained work experience, he gradually moved up in the world. A climb uninterrupted by the draft since, once due consideration had been given to his lengthy juvenile record, it was decided that the military wasn't the place for him after all. That although the US Army was desperate for men in those days, they weren't desperate enough to take a person like him, as he was informed one day in a letter which he read with a strange mix of emotions. Because while that may have been exactly what he had been hoping to hear since he had no desire to go to Vietnam, still there was something painful about seeing the actual words. That cold, bureaucratic, We don't want you. That one more in the long string of rejections which had so characterized his life. If you can call it a life.

In spite of everything, though, Gabby was determined to turn his life around somehow, determined to make it into one that would be worth living. A happy life, a successful life, though not in the usual economic sense of that term. Not when he was every bit as bad at holding down a job as what his father had been, with the only difference being the fact that he didn't lose his jobs because of his drinking. He lost them because of his itchy feet instead, because of the constant desire he felt to move on, to quit whatever job he had and go out in search of something better. Not a better job necessarily, but a better life. A shared life. One in which he would finally cease to be alone, finally meet that lost brother he had been longing for ever since he could remember. That brother which the world owed him, absolutely owed him. He was sure that it did after everything that he had been through.

But a brother like that isn't easy to find, and Gabby suffered many disappointments over the years. He met guys who he thought could become true friends only to have them move on to other people. Others who were richer or cooler or better-connected. Others who weren't so graspingly needy as he was. And then there were other guys he met who played him. Used him and ripped him off. Guys who would take whatever they could get only to leave him high-and-dry in the end, dismayed and disillusioned with human nature and asking himself how he could possibly have been such a sucker. How he could have been taken in by a guy like that. While when it came to the women in his life, they were even worse than the men. Even more selfish and self-centered, even quicker to stab him in the back, so that each of his attempts at a romantic relationship soon ended in disaster.

Still Gabby refused to give up hope, though. Still he continued to search despite the long string of reversals that he suffered. Dreaming all the while of a better life, a better future.

Dreaming as the lonely months and years ticked slowly by without his ever finding the brother that he sought. And he was dreaming still in the spring of that one particular year in the early seventies during which he was working as a truck-driver. That year when the hippie movement was just reaching the height of its highest tide, its maximum extension across the land, even if it had gotten there in a much watered-down form. Because by that time everyone seemed to have gone hippie, everyone who wasn't a complete square. It was no longer just the poets and dreamers—and druggies—of the early days, and not just the campus liberal-progressive types, either. But by that time, even the frat-boys had gone hippie. Some of them had, anyway. While a few steps lower down on the social scale, the so-called counter-culture had spread even further and faster, spread like wildfire among the younger generation. With hippies and semi-hippies showing up everywhere you looked. Working-class white kids who had let their hair grow out long, small town kids smoking pot and dropping acid.

Because what else was a young person to do at the time? With defeat in Vietnam staring the country ever more directly in the face, and with the so-called establishment tarnished almost beyond recognition. What other alternative did anyone have in those days when either you dropped out or else you went down with the sinking ship? And since this was all taking place years after the beatniks had been absorbed by the hippies, while at the same time it would still be years in the future before the punks and others would appear on the scene with their own alternative versions of what it meant to drop out of straight society, that meant that either you were a hippie or a square. There was no third choice. Either you were on one side or you were on the other, for us or against us.

And Gabby was for us, of course he was. He had gone hippie. Sort of. As much of a hippie as anyone else he knew, having let his hair grow long and smoking pot whenever he got the chance, and he even dropped acid a few times though he really didn't care for the stuff. Not with the way that it made him even crazier than what he already was. And when he spoke with other long-hairs, he would always use the word brother, not bro like most of the other guys did since the full word had so much more resonance for him than did the shortened version. Calling them brothers in the same meaningless way that all the other hippies said it. Not in the way that you would say it to a real brother, though even in that diluted form, still it felt good just to say the word out loud. And on top of that he loved the sense of community that he got from hanging out with a group of like-minded people, sitting in a circle and passing a joint around. He loved the whole tribal aspect of it. So that yes, he was a hippie. Why not?

But he was also a trucker. Or at least he was making his living at the time by driving a truck, though truth be told his heart wasn't in it. Not in the way that it was with some of the other drivers who loved that sort of life. Sitting high up in the cab with the diesel engine roaring in front of them and tons of cargo behind, controlling it all with their arms and their feet. It was a feeling that did nothing for Gabby. Almost nothing. That feeling of power, that diesel-fueled road-reign. No, for him trucking was little more than a means to a paycheck, and if anything were to happen so that he lost his present job, then who cared. He could always go out and get another job, and a better one, too. One that wasn't so lonely. Because that was the thing that he couldn't take about truck-driving was the loneliness of it, sitting in that cab all by himself while his partner slept in back. Driving along for hour after hour with no one to talk to and nothing but the radio to keep him company. Oh, it was terrible. The worst job ever.

And so when he heard some guy talking on the c.b. radio that one night, that late-spring night, announcing to the world that he had a hitchhiker who was looking for a ride all the way to the Gulf, Gabby didn't have to think twice before calling back to ask when and where. Not when the alternative was a whole night of loneliness, his partner having recently gone to bed. Not when he knew that this would be his chance to have someone to talk with as he drove along, someone to be his friend and companion for the night. And if the trucking company's rules said no hitchhikers? Well, tough shit.

The hitchhiker he stopped to pick up turned out to be a big guy, tall and strong and agile—a real physical specimen—with a little seabag on his shoulder as he made his way over to the passenger side of the cab. And then as the guy climbed in and sat down, there was something about him that Gabby liked right away, almost as though a chemical reaction were taking place between the two of them. An instant bonding in the way that brothers... No, wait a minute, Gabby told himself. You've gotta hold back on that stuff no matter how real it might feel, no matter how strong. Because by then he had been burned far too many times, opened his brother-heart only to have it ripped right out of his chest. So that with this guy, he was going to be more careful, he vowed. He was going to hold back until he saw how things were.

"My name's Gabby," he said as he worked his way back up through the gears. "What's yours?"

"It's uh... Gary, I guess," the guy answered hesitantly.

"Ya guess? Ya mean ya don't know?"

"No, it's just... It's Gary."

"Well then hi there, Gary-I-Guess. That's a helluva name ya got there." Gabby spoke in a light-hearted, joking way. Something that his years of painful experience had shown him to be the best way of making friends quickly.

"No, it's just plain Gary," the guy said in a serious tone, as though he didn't get the joke.

"Well okay then, Just-Plain-Gary."

"No, it's..."

"Or is it Just-Plain-Gary-I-Guess?"

"No, it's Gary... Gary!"

"Okay then, Gary-Gary."

"No, it's... Oh, I give up... Gabby-Gabby," the guy suddenly shot back as the two of them broke out laughing.

"So who was that guy give ya the ride back there?" Gabby asked, trying to get things rolling. "Was he a trucker or what?"

“No, he was just some guy.”

“But he had a c.b. in his car, huh?”

“Oh man, he had that and he had like... He had just about everything, man!”

“Everything? Like what?”

“Well, like when he was pickin’ me up, he showed me he had these big jack-ups on the suspension. And then on the inside-a the car, he had like... Man, he had all sorts-a shit in there like police scanners and radar detectors and like...”

“Police scanners? Wow, that’s weird. That’s like... So was he a pig or somethin’?”

“I hope not, man. Cause if he was, you’re busted.”

Gabby laughed at the joke, but then a moment later, he half-shouted, “Oh shit! There he is! Them flashin’ lights in the rearview.” And when Gary reacted by leaning forward to look in the mirror on his side, Gabby cracked up completely, Gary quickly joining in. Oh, he liked this guy, he liked him a lot.

“So that guy... That pig... He said you’re goin’ to ____?” Gabby asked after the laughter had subsided, giving the name of a city along the Gulf Coast.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Well then you’re in luck, man, cause this here truck’s gonna be goin’ right through there. All the way.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, real good.” Gabby tried to suppress his own enthusiasm as he spoke. Tried to hide the joy he felt at the knowledge that he wouldn’t be alone in the cab that night, but that Gary would be there to keep him company the entire time. Clear until morning when his partner would take over the driving. Morning and then some.

“So what’re ya goin’ down there for?” Gabby asked after a pause, not wanting to pry though searching for a subject with which to continue the conversation.

“Oh, I’m goin’ there to get me a ship,” Gary answered in a simple, open tone. “Cause I gotta get me a job.”

“So you’re a seaman?”

“Yeah, that’s me...”

“Hey, that’s great, man,” Gabby burst out, his heart on his sleeve as usual. “Ya know, that’s somethin’ I always been thinkin’ about doin’. Goin’ out and sailin’ away on one-a them ships and just...”

“Yeah, you and a whole lotta other guys.”

“But me, I’m serious, man. Cause I don’t just talk about doin’ shit like that. I go out and do it!”

“Yeah...?”

“Fuckin’ rights I do! Cause I say I’m gonna do somethin’ and I do it.”

“Okay man, I believe ya.” Gary sounded a bit spooked at the passion in his new acquaintance’s voice. “I believe ya,” he said again in a soothing tone.

As Gabby quickly took the hint and did his best to rein it back in. “So tell me, how do I get into that stuff? Whatta I gotta do?”

“Now?”

“Yeah now. A course.”

“Oh man, it’s hard right now. It’s real hard. Not like what it was a few years back, like when I was gettin’ started. Cause now with the way the war’s been goin’...”

“The war? What about the war? What’re ya sayin’?”

“I mean like the way they’re cuttin’ back on it all the time now, man. And I mean cuttin’ way back. Cause like they went and laid up all them old ships that they broke out for the war, so that now it’s like... Man, it’s like there ain’t nothin’ goin’ on.”

“But the war’s still goin’ on, ain’t it? That’s what I hear em sayin’ on the TV.”

“Yeah sure it’s still goin’ on, but it’s like they’re pullin’ back or somethin’. Cause there’s a whole lot less ships goin’ over there now than what there used to be. Like they got the stockpiles all built up or somethin’ so they don’t need all them ships anymore. But down there at the union hall, we still got all them old guys hangin’ around, ya know. All them World War Two guys that come back out to sea for the war, and they’re not goin’ nowhere. They’re just hangin’ around lookin’ for work, so like... It’s real tough for a young guy right now. Real tough.”

“Yeah...?” Gabby’s disappointment came through in his voice. He could hear it himself.

“Yeah, it’s even tough for me, and I’m a Group One. But it’s so bad that I don’t even know if I’m gonna get anything when I get down there. Not before my money runs out.”

“Oh yeah, cause the union won’t let ya...?”

“Cause like I’m not even registered with the union down there, man. Not yet. I’m not even on the list. So like when I get there, first thing I gotta do is sign up. But then when I do that, I’m gonna be all the way down at the bottom-a the list, man. The very last guy. So I don’t know...”

“So ya don’t got nothin’ waitin’ for ya down there? Ya don’t got...? Oh man, what’re ya gonna do?”

“I don’t know, brother. I just gotta hope, I guess.”

Brother! The guy just called him brother! And he did so in a tone that was much less hollow and phony-sounding than Gabby was used to hearing from hippies. He said it as though he might actually mean it. “So what? Ya want me to help ya? Ya want me to try gettin’ ya on with this truckin’ company or somethin’?”

“No man, I don’t need that. Cause like if I ever get real desperate, I can always try workin’ on them supply boats or them crew boats or shit like that they got goin’ out to the oil-rigs. Cause from what I hear, it’s pretty easy gettin’ on them things right now. Like with the way the Coast Guard says that everyone’s gotta have papers now-days. Real papers. So me with my z-card, I gotta be like... I’m golden, man.”

“Yeah? Your z-card? What’s a z-card?”

“Oh, that’s just what they call a seaman’s document is all. One-a them... You know, them cards the Coast Guard gives out.”

“And that’s all it takes if I wanta get me a job on them boats is one-a them z-cards? That’s what you’re sayin’? That all I gotta do is just... Hey wait, how do I get me one... man?” Gabby hesitated to use the word brother himself, because it meant too much for him to go throwing it around lightly with someone like this. Someone who might actually prove to be the brother for whom he was searching, the real brother. But while he may have used that milder term, still he couldn’t stop the excitement from rising in his voice once again.

“To get one now-days? Oh man, it’s like... It’s really hard, like I been tellin’ ya. Cause there’s no way ya can get a letter-of-intent these days, not like ya could a few years back when they needed guys for all them ships goin’ over to the war. And if ya go to one-a them union trainin’ schools, there’s probably not gonna be any work for ya when ya get out.”

“No...?”

“No man, cause like I say, this ain’t a good time.”

“So I better just... Ya figure I oughta hang onto this job I got?”

“Yeah, instead-a tryin’ to ship out. I guess ya should.”

“Ya guess...”

“And I tell ya, I don’t even know about them supply boats for sure. Cause like all I’m sayin’ is what I been hearin’. That’s all. But I can’t say for sure cause I never worked on em. I just heard guys talkin’ about em.”

“Yeah...?” Gabby’s enthusiasm was dying fast.

“I mean like... For all I know, I may end up havin’ to go get me a job on a fishin’ boat or somethin’.”

Fishing!! Gary had just said the word fishing, hadn’t he? He had said the one word that was even more magical to Gabby than was the word brother. The most precious word that he knew. Fishing! A word whose very sound called up such beautiful memories of that happy day, the happiest day he ever knew. The brightest, most wonderful day of his entire childhood. His entire life! That day which was in fact the only time that he ever got a taste of what true happiness could be. That day which he had dreamed of so often in the succeeding years as to have become a part of his soul, his very being. That day of joy and contentment, of a bliss such as he had never known before, never since.

It was the only time that he could ever remember seeing his father sober, that day when he came by the house not to beg for money from his ex-wife but rather to take his son fishing. Gabby, his son. And it was such a fantastic day. It was unbelievable! The best day ever. Going out to that lake and then sitting there with fishing rods in their hands and talking. Talking! The way that a father and son are supposed to talk to one another. The way they’re supposed to spend time together, one generation teaching the next. And even though they didn’t catch any fish that day, still it didn’t matter. Not to Gabby it didn’t. Not when he actually had a father for a day, that one single day, just like so many of the other kids had fathers to be there with them and love them and... Oh, if only there were some way that he could ever have another day like that. Just one more day in his life!

“Now you’re talkin’, brother!” Gabby was suddenly so excited that he was completely unaware of the name he called his companion. And he wasn’t aware of the depth of feeling with which he pronounced it either. Not when his mind was so totally absorbed all at once in its shining vision of that unforgettable day. “That’s what we gotta do, me and you. We gotta go out there and get us a job fishin’. Cause man, that’s like...”

“I don’t know...”

“That’s what it’s all about, brother. Me and you just sittin’ there pullin’ them fish outa the water and... You know, livin’ the fat life.” Gabby knew absolutely nothing about the realities of commercial fishing. “Cause like you know all about that type-a shit, right? You know how to get us on them boats and how to...”

“Me...?”

“So tell me brother, whatta I gotta do? You’re a seaman. You know all about it, and ya just gotta tell me. Whatta I...? Do I gotta go get me one-a them z-cards?”

“I don’t know, man. Cause I ain’t no fisherman...”

“Ya don’t gotta worry about me, brother. Cause if I gotta get me a card, then I’m gonna go get one. You just watch me! I’m gonna do whatever it takes. And you just... Like all ya gotta do is go around to them boats and find us one that we can work on. Me and you. One that’s lookin’ for a crew or like... Ya know what? How bout findin’ us one that we can run ourselves? Ya know what I mean? Just me and you out there runnin’ the whole shittaree. Cause like you’re

a seaman, right? So you know all about runnin' boats. And me, I'm a fast learner, brother. I tell ya I am. So ya just gotta teach me is all. Ya just gotta show me how. And then we can... Oh man, it's gonna be so great. I can see it now. It's gonna be like... The greatest, brother! The greatest ever."

BROTHERS

Gabby ranted and rambled as the truck rumbled its way down the freeway for mile after mile. Building his pie-in-the-sky vision higher, ever higher as he constructed an entire lifetime in his head, an entire future. Though as he spoke, he only managed to vocalize a small fraction of that wondrous vision to his friend. So bright and so glorious, so blinding in its beauty as to obscure everything else. Everything such as Gary's reactions, for instance, his less-than-enthusiastic rejoinders.

Because fishing! That was what it was all about. And the fire in Gabby's heart burned so fiercely as he spoke that his ears could hear nothing to the contrary, shutting themselves down each time that Gary tried to tell him that he wasn't a fisherman and that he had only spoken of fishing as a last-chance, desperation job. Something to fall back on in case all else failed. Because Gabby's ears refused to admit those words, and his brain refused to process them. Not when they could have proven so devastating to the imaginary world which he was creating. Not when they could have burst his bubble completely.

And so rather than listen, Gabby went on obsessively with his talk about fishing. About the two of them working on a boat together, the joys of a life like that. The sun and the stars and the salt spray and the fish flopping around on deck. Oh, it was going to be fantastic. It was going to be *so-o-o* much better than the life he was living now. And the more time that his mind spent lingering on that golden future—the more times it sailed off into the sunset aboard a fishing boat—the less attention he was paying to present concerns. His driving, for instance. So that while he may never have been what you would call a courteous driver, he was now driving like an absolute terror. Whipping that big rig around like he owned the road, or like he just didn't care if anyone else was there or not. Cutting people off whenever he felt like it and tailgating anyone who got in his way. Because it no longer made any difference to him if he was a bad driver, not when he knew that this was the last run he would ever have to make. That the minute this trip was over, he would be leaving the road forever to become a fisherman.

So Gabby talked and talked as he barreled along, and he ignored his friend's quiet protests and attempts to change the subject, focusing single-mindedly instead upon the one and only subject that interested him right then: fishing. A topic of such passion, though one within which his range of knowledge was so limited given his near total dearth of experience, that it wasn't long before he began to repeat himself. To say the same things over and over again though in slightly different words, or even in the same words exactly. Because what did he care if he was repeating himself? As long as he was drawing out the pleasure that much longer, extending the length of time spent living in that beautiful world inside his head. That glorious future of his imagination.

Spending days there, months, years, until finally he fell silent more from exhaustion than anything else. Emotional exhaustion. All the flaming passion of the last fifteen, twenty minutes having come pouring out through his mouth so that he was left too weak to go on. Too weak to object when Gary seized the opportunity to change the subject by telling him a sea-story. One that had nothing to do with fishing.

And Gabby still lacked the strength to speak as the big man's tale came to an end a short time later, the strength to comment or reply as that story was followed by another and then another. Non-fishing stories which he had no desire to listen to right then, though stories which soon proved to be so stirring in their own sort of way that it wasn't long before he felt something within him begin to respond despite his fatigue. His thoughts, his interest, his emotions, all of them being slowly drawn back out by those tales of ships and far-off places until at last he was able to join back in. You-don't-say and That's-right-brother and finally a few stories of his own. Truck-driving stories and others from the various lives he had lived over the last few years, though nothing from his earlier life. Absolutely nothing. Not when the least recall of those days was still so painful to him, bringing with it so many of those bad old feelings. The emptiness, the bitterness, the yearning for a different life, a better life. All those things that he wasn't ready to deal with just yet, perhaps never would be.

Fortunately for him, Gary proved to be the type who didn't ask inconvenient questions, didn't delve into other people's pasts as he spent all his time telling sea-stories instead. Talking about his own past though doing so in a way that revealed almost nothing about himself other than the fact that he went to sea for a living. Nothing about his childhood or even a mention the part of the country in which he grew up.

And nothing to serve as an opening for further discussion, as Gabby quickly came to realize to his alarm when the moment arrived that the guy ran out of sea-stories to tell, or at least when he ran out of the desire to tell any more, and when a deep silence suddenly came flooding into the cab. Silence! His greatest enemy, his greatest fear. And this wasn't just any old silence which he felt invading that enclosed little space either. No, it was an ominous silence which seemed to press down ever more heavily upon him as it grew deeper by the second, sucking the words right out of his mouth unspoken as he searched desperately for some way to fight back. Some way to keep this thing going. Because he hadn't stopped to pick this guy up just to ride along in silence. This brother. This fishing-brother! And the last thing he wanted was to see their budding friendship dissolve into that silence, that dark and depressing and lonely...

So he had to come up with some way to get things back on track, he just had to. But what could he possibly say? he asked with growing urgency as the seconds ticked relentlessly by. What subject could he bring up that didn't involve revealing too much about himself or his past, didn't involve prying too deeply into the other guy's past? What besides the weather or the road ahead? Or hey, how about something they heard on the radio? They could always talk about that, couldn't they? Gabby thought all at once as he reached over to turn up the volume and tune the thing to a news station where hopefully he would find something to discuss. Some tool to use in his struggle to hold back that silence. That awkward, that uneasy, that eerie silence.

"So whatta ya think?" Gabby asked, latching onto the first topic to come along. "Ya think McGovern's gonna win?"

“McGovern...?”

“Yeah, you know. That guy runnin’ against Nixon.”

“Oh him... I don’t know, man. I’m not into politics.”

“Well I tell ya what, he better win. Cause I don’t know who the fuck’d be stupid enough to vote for that asshole Nixon. Him and that stupid-ass war-a his. So a course McGovern’s gonna win. He’s got to.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, sure he is. He’s gotta win. He’s... got to...”

As Gabby’s voice faded, the silence made its return, cold and bleak. Until tossing out a different topic moments later, a better topic, he hoped... “Who gives a flyin’ fuck about the Beatles anyway? Bunch-a pussies.”

“Ah, they were okay...”

“Bunch-a lime-ass wimps is what I say. And I don’t give a fuck if they ever get back together or not.”

“No man, it’d be cool, cause they were like...”

“Now if it was the Animals gettin’ together, that’d be... Shit man, I’d go see em myself. I sure as shit would.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

“Fuckin’ rights it’d be good! Fuckin’ rights.”

“But ya know, so would the Beatles gettin’ back together, man. Cause like...”

“Fuck the Beatles! That’s what I say. Bunch-a fuckin’...”

“Okay man, whatever ya say.”

“Yeah! Fuck the Beatles. Fuck em...”

The silence was back after that. Silence. Silence! Until something coming over the radio... “I don’t see why the fuck they don’t just shoot all them protesters anyway. Cause like all them assholes are doin’ is makin’ it worse.”

“Makin’ it worse? Makin’ what worse?”

“The whole fuckin’... You know, the war, man!”

“The war? The protesters are makin’ it worse...”

“Yeah, they sure as shit are. Cause they’re always... I mean, just look at the way they’re runnin’ around sayin’ all that shit and like... Ah fuck it! They oughta shoot em all is what. Every goddamn one of em!”

Silence once again, that ever-returning silence. Until something Gabby heard... “Ya know, that McGovern’s a real pussy sometimes, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know...”

“Cause like look at Nixon. Now there’s a guy who’s tough. He’s like... I mean look at that trip he made to China, man. That shit was like... That guy really knows what the fuck he’s doin’, ya know.”

Gary didn’t respond this time, so Gabby continued with the subject himself. “And he’s the only guy around here knows how to get us outa this fuckin’ war, too. Cause like with that McGovern asshole, he’d probably just... Man, the only thing he’d do is he’d surrender.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Fuckin’ rights!”

Silence, silence, always that silence. Until something on the radio... “What the fuck do they keep talkin’ about that Wallace asshole for anyway?”

“Wallace...?”

“Yeah you know, that guy used to be the governor-a one-a these states around here. Went and got himself shot awhile back.”

“Oh yeah, that guy.”

“Well fuck him, man! What the fuck do I care if he never walks again? I don’t give a flyin’ fuck. Cause he deserved it anyway.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, he sure as shit did! And they shoulda shot that asshole a long time ago is what I say. Shoulda shot him dead!”

Silence again. Silence until something... Anything... “Shit! Did ya hear that? Did ya hear how many guys got killed over there this week?”

“Yeah, it’s a lot, man.”

“A fuck of a lot! And for what? For nothin’, man! A whole bunch-a nothin’. A bunch-a fuckin’ rice-paddies and a bunch-a slant-eyed gooks. Stab ya in the back.”

“It’s bad, man.”

“Fuckin’ rights it’s bad! And I tell ya what we oughta do is we oughta just get the hell outa there is what. Just say, ‘Sayonara, assholes,’ and then get the fuck out! That’s what we oughta do.”

Growing tired of hearing the same few news items being endlessly repeated, frustrated with the way those topics kept misfiring again and again, finally Gabby reached out to search for music on the radio dial. Country music of course, being in the part of the country where they were. And then once he had found a good, strong station, he sat back to listen as he waited for something to pop into his head, something with which to revive the conversation, however briefly. “Ya think they’re ever gonna legalize weed?”

“I hope so, man.”

“Cause like they got to, don’t they? I mean, look at how many people they got smokin’ it now-days, so they got to, right? They got to.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Cause what the fuck? Ya think they’re still gonna be bustin’ people for that shit twenty, thirty years from now? Ya think they’re still gonna be lockin’ em up? Man, that’d be like...”

“It’d be stupid, huh?”

“Yeah, real stupid. Real fuckin’ stupid. And I don’t think... Man, there’s no way that people around here can be that stupid, can they?”

“I don’t know, man...”

“Nah, no way they’re that stupid. No fuckin’ way!”

As the silence made its return, its inevitable, its inexorable return, soon Gabby was throwing something out there almost at random. “Hey, what’s this bullshit I hear about people callin’ themselves freaks and writin’ it with two e’s? Like they’re free-ee-eks instead a freaks. What the fuck’s that all about?”

“I don’t know, man. Maybe they just wanta do it is all.”

“Why? Cause they don’t know how to spell?”

“No, it’s more like... Ya know when ya write it that way, you’re writin’ the word free.”

“Free? Like free to do what? Free to...?”

“Free to do whatever ya wanta do, man.”

“Like free to be a fuckin’ idiot, huh?”

“If that’s your thing, ya know.”

“Free to be a freak. A real fuckin’ free-ee-eek.”

Another fade, another round of silence. Until trying and trying again... “Hey brother, did ya ever see a ghost anywhere?”

“Like a real ghost?”

“Yeah, a real one. Like a... You know.”

“No man, I never did.”

“Well I did!”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, it was back when I was a kid. At this old cemetery where everyone used to say that it was haunted and where they...” Where the other kids had dared him to go there at night. Alone. And where he had gotten so scared that he had... “Or what about UFO’s? Did ya ever see any-a them when you’re out there at sea?”

“I don’t know, man. Cause like I seen a few things out there.”

“Like UFO’s?”

“Like I don’t know what, man. Just stuff is all.”

“Yeah? And ya can’t...?”

“No man. Cause it’s just like... stuff.”

The conversation refused to take off no matter how Gabby tried, and he didn’t know why that was. He didn’t know what he was doing wrong or how to remedy the situation. What he could say or do that might loosen things up and get those brother-juices flowing again in the same way that they had earlier on, back when the two of them had been talking about fishing. When Gabby had talked and talked, and when Gary had... Wait a minute. What exactly had he done? Had he listened and had he...? Gabby couldn’t remember what Gary had said or done, though whatever it was, it must have contributed to the feelings of that moment. The togetherness, the magic almost. So he must have said something... Something...

And even now as the guy was saying so little, still Gabby liked him a lot. The way you like a brother. And as far as he could tell, the big guy liked him, too. But there was something about those silences of his, something that didn’t feel quite right between the two of them. And soon Gabby was asking himself if perhaps the problem had to do with the types of subjects that he had been throwing out for discussion. Had they been too cold and impersonal? Was that what was wrong? And was the only thing left for him to do now to drop his defenses and get personal? To open that brother-heart of his and open it wide, talk about some of the things which he had never dared to tell anyone before—no one but a couple of those phony pseudo-brothers years

back, anyway. Things about himself and his past and what was truly inside him, deep in his guts. The types of things that you can only talk about with a brother...

No!! How could he do a thing like that when he had only known this guy for so short a time? And when it went against everything that he had learned in life. All his lessons about self-preservation and about looking out for number one, the rest of the world be damned. Because that's the only way to get by in a cold, cruel world where no one is ever on your side. Where everyone is out to get you and where if you want to survive, you've got to keep your head down. Never opening up to anyone. No one! Never exposing yourself or anything about you so that you never give anyone a chance to hurt you.

So then how could he do that now? he wondered. How could he open up with this guy he had just met? How? How!?

Hey, maybe what they needed was a bit of chemical assistance, Gabby thought all at once. Maybe that would get things back on track, if the two of them were to get stoned together. And whether it would work out or not, at least it was a whole lot easier than the other option he had just been thinking about. That opening up about himself bullshit.

As he brought up the subject a moment later, however, it was only to discover that there was one small glitch in that new plan of his. One big glitch. Because while Gabby had known already that he had no weed on him, it turned out that Gary, too, was dopeless. That they didn't have a single joint between them, the only thing to smoke in that entire cab the tobacco in his pocket. So that if he wanted to partake of anything stronger, he would have to come up with some way to get it. Some way to... When suddenly it occurred to him. Suddenly he remembered a place that he had heard about from another trucker some time back. A small-town bar that lay somewhere up ahead, just off the Interstate. And when that fellow-trucker had told him about the name and location of the bar, he had also given him the name of a guy to ask for once he got inside. A guy who would be able to get him whatever he wanted, so the man had said.

And so Gabby began to watch for signs as he drove along. Watched until finally as he came to the town and the exit that he had been told about, he pulled the truck over and parked it at the bottom of the off-ramp, a place where it wouldn't look too suspicious in case the police were to come by. And then checking the clock on the dash to see that it was almost closing time, soon he was climbing out to walk the last block or so to the bar, telling his brother as he went, "Stay here. I'll be right back." Because his wealth of experience told him that things were bound to work out better if he were to enter the place alone. Besides which he didn't want to shut off the engine since it might awaken his sleeping partner, while at the same time he didn't want to leave the big rig idling by the side of the road with no one in the cab. So that the best thing to do would be to leave his brother there while he went off to make the score.

Went off to do the sort of thing that he had already done many times before in his short trucking career. Walking into that broken-down little roadside bar and going up to the pot-bellied bartender and asking for José, after which he stood and waited while the guy looked him over to see whether or not he was the real thing. Looked for the types of signs that narcs can never truly imitate, signs such as those deep scars of his upbringing, of all the time he spent locked up. Those scars which he could never conceal even had he tried. It didn't take long before the

bartender seemed satisfied with what he saw, pointing Gabby in the direction of a guy in the back by the pool table. A grungy-looking white guy who had nothing José about him, not in his appearance and not in his speech when he answered Gabby's hello with another good looking-over, followed by a question. "Ya come here walkin' or what?" To which Gabby responded by leading the guy over to the door and pointing out the truck which sat idling a block away. All as per the usual script.

And it was only when Gabby made his request for weed that José was to make a major departure from that script. "Shit man, I don't deal in no love-grass," he said in a dismissive tone. Well then what *did* he have? He had coke, that's what he had. Plenty of coke. That and a few pills. Coke? That wasn't what Gabby was after. It wasn't what he was into, a whole lot of bucks for the bang, as far as he was concerned, though he didn't say that last part out loud. No? Not interested? Well too bad. Cause if he was, he could get himself a damn good price on it, this being closing time and all, José ready to deal. Ready to sell it to him cheap. Like at cost.

At cost? That'd be a helluva deal for someone who knew where to get rid of it, Gabby thought to himself. Trying not to let this José character know what was passing through his head as he considered the possibilities, and as all at once he remembered another guy he knew who lived a couple more hours down the road. A guy who had asked him for cocaine on more than one occasion.

So how much coke did José have exactly, and how much did he want for it?... Oh!? That much, huh? Gabby had a lot of money on him right then, but not quite that much. So not wanting to let on that he was short, he came back at the guy with a lower offer. Hey I told ya, man, it's at cost. I can't go no lower. Well then how bout if I just buy half of it? If ya do that, then it's full price.

Gabby continued to say nothing about how much money he actually had on him. He continued to act as though he were simply undecided, so that soon José began to sweeten the deal for him in a different way. Offering him the pills free of charge and finally throwing in a couple of joints. All the love-grass he had on him, he claimed. At which point Gabby finally said okay. Maybe. Though he would have to go talk it over with his business partner.

And Gabby was in a state of high excitement as he made his way back to the truck. "Hey brother, I got this great deal goin' on back there, but there's this one little..." He didn't know how to start, how to go about asking a hitchhiker for a loan. "I got this little problem."

"Yeah?" Gary spoke to him through the open window.

"Yeah, cause like I got... Man, I got the sweetest deal goin' on with this guy back there, and I'm gonna make me a whole shitload-a money out of it. But there's this one little problem, ya see. There's this... Brother, I don't got enough cash on me is what. Not right now I don't," Gabby finally spit it out. And when Gary's only reply was a noncommittal grunt, he soon went on in the same undiplomatic vein. "So what I gotta do is I gotta borrow some money from ya, brother. Not a lot. But just..."

"From me!?" Gary said as though he could hardly believe what he was hearing. As though he hadn't seen that one coming at all.

“Yeah, just a few bucks is all. Just enough to like...”

“Man, ya think I’d be hitchin’ if I had any money?”

“It’s just a little that I need, brother. Just like... I mean like... Forty, fifty bucks,” Gabby said the words softly as though to lessen the impact.

“Forty bucks!?” It was clear that Gary didn’t like the sound of those words, though at least he didn’t follow up with a quick, I don’t have that much.

An encouraging sign, Gabby said to himself as he soon began to beg. “Just whatever ya can spare, brother. That’s all. And I mean like... It’s just for a little while, too. It’s just for now.”

“Till when?”

“Till a little ways up the road is all. Like two hours, two-and-a-half. Cause once we get there, I can like... Man, I can pay ya back double is what I can do! I can pay ya eighty bucks when we get there. Eighty bucks! Double your money in like just a couple-a hours. Eighty bucks.”

“Yeah...?” Gary still sounded wary, though perhaps he was beginning to weaken. And he still hadn’t said a word about not having forty bucks on him.

And so Gabby pushed on. “I tell ya, brother. It’s a sure thing. Cause it’s like... I mean, it can’t fail. Ain’t nothin’ gonna go wrong. And like all ya gotta do is just... Ya wait a couple-a hours and then, bang! Eighty bucks. Right there in your hand. Eighty bucks, brother!”

Gary finally relented after several more assurances, and then as he began to dig into his pocket for the money, Gabby asked him to step out of the truck. Because he wanted that José character to see who exactly he had backing him up, just in case the guy got any funny ideas. He wanted José to see how big Gary was. Though at the same time not wanting to spook the guy, he asked the big man to stay by the truck, ready in case he was called upon but far enough away to pose no immediate threat.

After digging around in his pockets for some time, Gary managed to come up with the whole forty dollars, pulling it out one bill at a time and leaving the distinct impression that it was nearly everything he had. And then as he handed the money over, he looked Gabby straight in the eye and repeated once again, “Ya promise, right?”

“Yeah, brother. Absolutely! I promise,” Gabby told him with the sort of sincerity that one can only show when speaking to a brother. A fishing-brother.

And it was such a great feeling that filled Gabby’s breast as he went off to make the buy. That feeling of for once having someone there to watch his back. A brother. And not just any brother either, but one who was so big and strong. One whose mere presence was enough to give him a feeling of safety. Protection. As though nothing could happen to him as long as he had Gary on his side, providing him with all that sense of security which he had never felt before in his life. Not once. Not until now. And oh how he loved it, how he reveled in it.

In complete ecstasy as he walked back to the truck some minutes later, with stash in hand and with the full glow of the product upon him. The taste which he had insisted upon taking before any money changed hands. So happy that he could have given that brother of his a great big hug—even though he wasn't a fag. So happy that he had to stop himself from whooping out loud and waking up his sleeping partner as he stuck the plastic bag full of little folded-up packets beneath the seat and then climbed inside and started the big rig rolling once again. Because Gabby didn't want to ruin it now by giving away what he had just done, all the money that he had made for himself, as good as made. All that money-in-his-pocket. And as he glanced over at his brother seated beside him, he just had to ask himself, How can it possibly get any better than this? How can life get better?

A question which he was soon to answer for himself when he pulled out one of the joints that José had given him and lit it up and passed it to Gary. Because from that moment on, it was unbelievable!

The only sour note was the way that he had to drive extra-fast now in order to make up for all the lost time, trying to reach the truck-stop where he and his partner were to change places by the appointed time. Though at least the traffic wasn't a problem at that time of night, so that all he really had to do was to get into a new rhythm as he drove, a faster rhythm.

Something like the new rhythm which their friendship had begun to take on with the smoking of that joint, the whole new level of bonding which Gabby could feel taking place between the two of them. The way that, while those long silences may have remained, there had ceased to be anything uncomfortable about them. Because all they were now were simple stoned-brother silences. The sorts of silences that draw people together rather than tearing them apart, the sorts that can be interrupted when you have something to say or allowed to go on and on, no problem either way. And if you happen to feel like singing along with one of the country classics coming over the radio, why then help yourself. Because your brother will probably join in. "Stand by your man..."

What a wonderful night this was turning out to be, made even better a short time later when Gabby did up the rest of the cocaine which he had separated out from the stash earlier. The taste he had reserved for his brother but which the guy had refused, saying that he wasn't into hard drugs. So that seeing no good reason to wait any longer, Gabby was soon rolling up one of his last remaining dollar bills and then pulling out the half-full packet of coke and unfolding it on the steering-wheel as he drove. Finally leaning down and, with a certain amount of difficulty—and danger considering the high speed at which he was traveling—he managed to get the drug up his nose. Most of it.

Oh, this was great! Couldn't be better. Though as time went on, Gabby slowly became aware of something that was nagging at him somewhere deep inside, slowly making its way toward his consciousness. Something to do with Gary, he could sense, though he didn't know what that something could be. Something about... It couldn't be the guy's silences, he was convinced since he knew by then that Gary was simply a man who didn't have a lot to say, while he himself had more than enough to say for the both of them. So that, no. It had to be something else instead. Something like... like...

When all of a sudden it burst upon him like a revelation: The guy could be more! He could be so much more!! Because Gary had everything going for him, the size and the strength, even the brains which were much better than what he had been letting on. Gabby could tell. But then rather than being the world-beater that he should have been, the guy was so... So passive in a way, so go-with-the-flow. And as Gabby thought about his friend and brother in that light, he couldn't recall a single instance in which he had heard the guy utter an opinion of his own. Not once. Nothing stronger than, Yeah right. And that weakness in his manner of speech seemed somehow symptomatic of a more deep-seated weakness. Like there was a lack of will or something, a lack of backbone.

Because hadn't he let Gabby talk him into this whole drug-purchase deal? Hadn't he gone all wishy-washy on that one? Instead of putting up some real resistance or else seizing the opportunity the first moment it presented itself, either of which would have been better than what he actually did. The way he hung back and let himself get talked into it. Like he could be talked into anything, it appeared. And so as Gabby pondered the problem in that light over the next few miles of road, he began to ask himself what he could possibly do about it. What he could say that might get through to that big guy and make him aware of his own potential. Make him into the man that he could be, should be. The strong, assertive man that he would have to be if the two of them were ever going to get that fishing boat and make a go of it.

"Hey brother, d'ya ever...?" Gabby couldn't think of a delicate way to phrase it. All he could think of was the direct approach. "D'ya ever wanta just like... take charge?"

"Take charge-a what?"

"You know. Your life, brother! Take charge-a your life."

Gary didn't answer the question, staring at the road ahead and saying nothing as though he had no idea what his new friend could be talking about.

"I mean like..." Gabby searched for some way to explain himself further. "Like there's somethin' ya wanta do, ya know, so ya like... Ya just go out and do it, ya know?"

"Ya mean like hitchin' to the Gulf?"

"No man, I mean like... Say ya got this dream about what ya wanta do. Like with your life, I mean. This big dream. So ya like... Ya go for it, brother! Ya go out there and ya... ya go for it."

"What type-a dream ya talkin' about?" Gary could sound so dense sometimes.

"I mean anything. Whatever ya wanta do with your life, brother. Cause like say ya... I don't know. Say ya wanta make somethin' outa yourself. Ya wanta like... you know, do somethin' big with your life, so ya go out and ya... ya take charge of it. Ya know what I mean?" Gabby's range of allusion was nearing its limits as he struggled to find some way to express the ideas in his head. Those ideas which were so much more profound and convincing than the words coming out of his mouth. "Like ya can't just go driftin' through life, ya know. Ya gotta like... Someday ya gotta... you know, take charge."

Gary hardly answered again after that as Gabby went on talking about creating one's own future rather than drifting through life, floating with the breeze. And as he said those things, at that moment he truly believed them, unaware of the hypocrisy in what he was saying. Blind to the fact that he had been floating with the breeze throughout his own life, drifting from state to state and job to job. But hypocritical or not, nothing he said seemed to have any effect. Nothing stirred Gary and nothing elicited more than the blandest of responses.

And it wasn't until after many minutes of wasted effort, just as Gabby was about to give up on ever finding a way to get through to the guy and teach him about life and its possibilities, that suddenly a new idea came to him. A new word appeared in his head. "Ya know what freedom's all about, don't ya, brother?"

"Freedom...?" There was something in Gary's tone as he repeated the word, as though he were coming to life at last. Finally starting to care about what was being said.

"Yeah, ya know what it's all about? It's about livin' the life ya wanta live, is what. It's about..." He nearly said taking charge once again, when a better word... "It's about your destiny, brother. It's about makin' your own destiny."

"Ya think so? Ya don't think it's just... you know, doin' what ya wanta do?"

"It's about doin' what ya wanta do, but doin' it big-time, brother. Ya know what I mean? Doin' it like... with your whole life. Ya know? The whole fuckin' thing. Cause it's not just like... you know, I think I'm gonna go hitchhike to the Gulf or shit like that. It's like... I'm gonna go out there and get me a fishin' boat. That's what it is."

"That's freedom?"

"Fuckin' rights it is. It's like... Ain't no one gonna stop me, ya know, cause I'm like... I'm gonna do it, brother. I'm gonna do it!"

"But ya know, when ya don't got much money, and ya..."

"Fuck the money! Cause this is freedom I'm talkin' about here, brother. Freedom!!"

"But how the fuck do ya do that? Cause ya know in this country the only way you're ever gonna get any freedom is if ya go out and buy it. Cause freedom's for sale around here, ya know. Just like every other fuckin' thing is."

Gary was speaking his heart now, Gabby could see that he was. That there was no trace left of the hitchhiker out to humor the guy who was giving him a ride, as instead he was becoming fully engaged in the subject at last. Saying the things that he truly felt.

"Ya can buy it, or ya can steal it, too, ya know. Cause ya don't have-ta... I mean if ya want it bad enough, ya can just... It's yours, brother. It's ours!"

"Ya think so? Ya really think ya can steal it like that? Ya think ya can just...?"

“Sure, brother. Sure as shit! Cause like if ya want it bad enough, all ya gotta do is just... I mean, fuck the money. Fuck the money!”

“Ya know, ya may be right about that, brother.” Gary said that last word with a level of feeling in his voice that Gabby hadn’t heard before. Straight from the heart, straight from the soul in the way that a true brother is supposed to say it. With no hesitation and no second thoughts.

“A course I’m right. A course I’m right... Brother!”

When the conversation faded back into silence a short time later, it was unlike any of the silences which had come before. Far beyond the awkward silences of their first hour or two together and even beyond the stoned-brother silences which had come later. Because by now their silence had become... Is there any such thing as mental telepathy? Gabby had never believed in it. Not until now, he hadn’t. Not until this...

Because it was like he could tell exactly what Gary was thinking. And when he felt like answering one of those thoughts, he didn’t have to open his mouth. All he had to do was to think the answer and Gary would hear it, he was sure that he did. He could tell from the looks that the guy would give him from time to time, from the way his head would nod slightly whenever a thought was sent his direction, and from the way he would look at whatever it was that Gabby’s mind was urging him to look at. All of it so strange yet so very real. And it wasn’t just the effects of the drugs, either. Gabby knew that it couldn’t be, not when they had only smoked a single joint together—that and the tiny amount of cocaine which he had done up. So there had to be more to it than that, a whole lot more. It had to be... Real!

As real as the moment when all at once Gary broke the silence. Gary!! “From what I hear, they mostly got shrimpin’ goin’ on down there in the Gulf, so I don’t know what type-a fishin’ ya was plannin’ on doin’.”

Gabby was so elated when he heard those words that he could hardly respond. Because here was his brother bringing up the subject of fishing and doing so on his own, with no prompting of any sort. So that while the guy may have used the word “you” in what he said, Gabby’s mental telepathy told him that he had actually been thinking “we” as he spoke. That with that brief speech of his, he had in fact been confirming everything that the two of them had talked about earlier, all the plans they had laid about the fishing boat and the future. He had been saying that he was in on it at last, in on it all the way.

And it was so great for Gabby to hear those words! It was un-fuckin-believable!! So fantastic that he wanted to reach over and give the guy a hug right then and there. A kiss. Because it was all so... Hey, wait a minute. What was going on around here? Was Gabby starting to turn fag for real? Had this brotherly-love thing of his gone completely overboard? Was he...?

Look out!! All at once, a danger loomed out of the darkness ahead of them, directly in the path of their headlights. A car with no lights on it, no warning of any kind, stopped in the middle of the road. Partway in their lane and partway on the shoulder. And if it hadn’t been for Gabby’s quick reactions, those reactions which had saved him so many times in the past, they surely

would have gone smashing right into it. Though as it was, Gabby managed to swerve the truck just in time to miss the thing. Struggling after that to keep the big rig under control as he brought it to a stop on the shoulder a short distance down the road.

“You fuckin’ idiot!” he yelled at the top of his lungs as he got out of the truck and began to run back toward the car, followed by his brother. “What the fuck ya think you’re doin’!? Leavin’ that car sittin’ in the middle-a the road with no lights on it like that? Ya fuckin’ crazy or what!?”

As Gabby ran, cursing and hollering, a guy got out of the car and took a step in his direction. A guy who had to be one of the dumbest-looking dumb-ass rednecks that he had ever seen in his life. He could tell even from a distance, even in the dark. A redneck who finally spoke back as he began to draw near. “She died on me,” he said in a drawl so deep that Gabby had a hard time understanding him. Gabby who had spent a good part of his life in the South.

“So what the fuck? Ya just gonna leave it sittin’ there? No flashers or nothin’?”

“Flashers...?” the guy said vaguely in reply as he readjusted the faded John Deere cap on his head.

Jesus! This guy really *was* that stupid. Too stupid even for a farmer so that he must have stolen that hat. Too stupid even to look behind him and see the headlights of another vehicle approaching as he stood right out in the road. “Yeah, the flashers! To let people know you’re here,” Gabby shouted as he approached the car to turn them on himself.

But then it was just as he was leaning down to reach in through the driver’s side window that suddenly he saw something that he hadn’t been expecting at all. Because rather than seeing an empty car, what he saw inside was a heavy, stringy-haired woman sitting in the passenger seat while the backseat was filled with grimy little sleeping kids. Three or four or more of them, sprawled out across that seat as though nothing were wrong, nothing in the world. As though it weren’t the least bit dangerous for them to lie there sleeping in a car that was stopped in the middle of a darkened freeway.

“What the fuck’re they doin’ in there!? Ya tryin’ to get em killed or what? Cause someone comes plowin’ into this car...!” Gabby was yelling at the guy even louder now, unable to believe the stupidity of him. The stupidity of her as he turned to yell directly at the wife. “Get the hell outa there, you! Get outa that car! And get them kids out, too. Get em out now! Jesus Christ. How fuckin’ stupid!?”

A couple of the kids burst out crying as they were startled awake by the sound of his voice, but he didn’t care. Not when he knew that what he was saying was going to save their little lives. Something that their dumb-ass parents were too stupid to do. So go ahead and cry, you little brats! At least you’ll still be alive tomorrow morning. Alive to grow up into a whole new generation of dumb-ass rednecks, just like your parents.

The mother sprang to life and had the door open in no time, shooing the kids outside and reaching in to pull out the last of them who was still sound asleep. Getting everyone clear of the car just in time as the approaching truck shot by in the left lane, having been warned to change

lanes by the flashers which that idiot father hadn't known anything about. And then with the little guy in her arms, soon the mother was leading the other kids over to the far side of the shoulder, as far away from the crazy man as they could go. All the way over to where it began to drop off into a ditch, as there the group of them stood huddling together after that, the mother doing her best to comfort the kids while dirty tears streamed down their homely little faces.

The redneck did nothing to help as he watched the scene unfold, barely saving himself, in fact, as he responded to Gabby's waves just in time to get out of the way of that truck. While as for Gary, he stood back indecisive as well. A helpless giant. Sometimes looking at his friend as though for guidance while other times he looked at the kids. Leaning toward them like he wanted to go over and help, but holding back as though afraid that by doing so he would only make matters worse. So that in the end all there was left for him to do was to watch those poor little kids as they cried their hearts out in the warm night air.

Gabby was far from being indecisive, though, as no sooner was everyone safely out of the car than he was getting ready to act. Watching and waiting for the right moment as a car went flying by them in the left lane followed by another truck, until finally when there were no more headlights to be seen, he was sliding into the driver's seat of the beat-up old rust-bucket that those rednecks called a car, shoving the transmission into neutral and releasing the parking brake before stepping back out. Turning at last to speak to his over-sized brother while ignoring the redneck completely, "Come on. Gimme a push."

Because why would he want to say anything to that incompetent asshole? And what could he have said besides calling him an idiot once again? That idiot!

Gary jumped right to work upon being called. He pushed that car as hard as two men, three. And as it began to move, Gabby reached inside the door and turned the steering wheel to the right until he felt it click into a locked position. Turning that big old boat-of-a-car toward the shoulder—and toward the ditch beyond if he wasn't careful. Moving it steadily onto the shoulder and further on and further still as the two of them pushed. Gabby and Gary, though not the redneck who evidently couldn't take a hint.

That dumb-ass! That useless piece of shit. Good for nothing but pumping out more and more little dumb-ass redneck kids all the time and filling the world with all those... Why was it that those redneck kids always had so goddamn many brothers and sisters around, anyway? Why were they the lucky ones? As stupid and ugly as they were. Because they always had someone there for them when they needed it, someone to back them up. Unlike Gabby who had always been forced to fend for himself. Gabby who never had anyone on his side. No one at all. So then why was it always them? Why did they have all the luck? Those dumb-ass rednecks.

The car was moving faster all the time thanks to Gary's great strength. Further and further onto the shoulder until one of the front tires reached the edge of the ditch and started down, the forces of gravity quickly taking over as the car began to take off on its own.

Hey, I better get in and stop this thing, Gabby said to himself. Too late, though, as the other front tire passed the point of no return and started its descent as well. Too late as the car was suddenly going so fast that it was impossible for him to jump inside and reach the brake,

impossible to do anything but step back and watch the thing go. The old pile of junk plunging headfirst into the ditch and dragging Gary along with it as he clung to the rear bumper and pulled with all his strength, his feet slipping and sliding on the gravel of the shoulder as he fought the inevitable. The car plunging and plunging until it came to a stop at last, the rear end just above the level of the road with the flashers still going strong. And with Gary standing above it all, holding the rusted-out bumper which had come off in his hands.

Gabby felt a bit ridiculous as he stood and looked at the old car head-down in the ditch. He felt embarrassed at his rescue effort having gone so wrong, and it took him a few seconds to work up the nerve to turn and face the redneck, avoiding eye contact as he mumbled out a quiet, "Afraid it got away from me."

"My car! It's in the ditch," the redneck cried out in disbelief.

No shit, Sherlock! Gabby said to himself as he shrugged his shoulders in reply. Because what more could he say?

"Now we gotta get her back outa there," the redneck whined. "Now ya gotta pull her back out."

We? And you!? The guy had just used those words, hadn't he? Like he thought this was their problem as well as his own. And like he expected Gabby to stick around there playing tow-truck driver when he had a schedule to keep, that truck-stop where he had to be in the next few hours. And as he suddenly became aware of all the time that he had lost in his efforts to help this guy out, all the time that he was losing still as he stood around looking at that wreck of a car, Gabby knew that he had to get going. He had to get out of there, and he had to do it now. And so, "Good luck," he said quietly as he turned away, turned his eyes toward his brother who still stood by the raised rear-end of the car, bumper in hand.

But the redneck refused to accept Gabby's goodbye. "Ya gotta pull her back outa there," he said with rising insistence. "Ya gotta pull her outa that ditch!"

Me!? Gabby said to himself as he heard the guy use the word "you" once again, heard him say it in a tone that hit him right where he lived. Because here was this guy not just asking for help but demanding it like he thought that Gabby owed it to him or something. Like everything that had happened just now had been his fault and his alone. Gabby to blame for the car having ended up in the ditch the way it had, while the guy's own screw-ups had had nothing to do with it as far as he was concerned. His decision to leave the car stopped in the middle of the freeway with no flashers or anything.

And the anger was rising rapidly within him as Gabby looked the guy straight in the eye at last and spoke with all the finality in his voice that he could muster, "I said good luck to ya!" Turning to Gary after that to yell, "Come on! We gotta get goin'."

"Get goin'!?" It was the redneck who answered him, though, speaking in a tone of open accusation. One that made it clear that he truly did blame everything on Gabby. Absolutely everything. "But ya can't..."

“Yes I can! Cause I gotta go. And you gotta be a man! Ya gotta be a fuckin’ man!!” Gabby was in a rage by now, a complete rage. “Ya gotta go get yourself a tow-truck is what ya gotta do. And ya gotta deal with it like a man!” And then as the guy shrank back, visibly cowed by the force of the words, Gabby yelled at his friend and brother once again. “Come on! Let’s go! We gotta get outa here.”

But still Gary failed to respond, still he stood indecisive, holding the bumper and looking down at the car, over at the woman and kids with a look of apology in his eyes. Making no move to approach them, though, whether from shame or from fear of retaliation, as instead it was only his eyes that moved. Glancing over and back, over and back, even as Gabby yelled at him yet again. And it wasn’t until Gabby resorted to threats that even the big guy reacted.

“Come on, I said! Come on if you’re comin’! Cause if ya don’t come now, I’m leavin’ ya here! Cause we gotta go! Now!!”

With those words Gary’s trance seemed to be broken at last. And after dropping the bumper and uttering a quiet but heartfelt, “Sorry,” to the woman, he turned to follow his leader.

Follow for a few steps anyway, their withdrawal soon interrupted by yet another plea from the redneck. Practically crying now. “Ya gotta help me out. Ya gotta gimme a ride...”

“What the fuck ya think this is!? A fuckin’ taxi service!?” Gabby was all over him in an instant.

“But I gotta...”

“Ya gotta get the fuck walkin’ is what ya gotta do! Ya gotta go get yourself a tow-truck. Cause ya can make it if ya start now. Ya just gotta be a man is all. Ya gotta deal with it!” And then once he had finished speaking, there was no more looking back on Gabby’s part. No more second thoughts and no hesitation, and no response to any of the guy’s ongoing whimpers and imprecations. Nothing but a steady and determined walk-away, by him and by his noticeably more hesitant friend.

Gabby soon had the truck back up to freeway speed, up to an even higher speed than before thanks to all the lost time that he had to make up for now. And he drove along without a word, his anger far too raw for him to speak to his friend in any civil way. Because the nerve of that redneck! To bitch and moan just because things hadn’t worked out exactly right. Just because he had screwed up a little bit right there at the end, when that other guy had screwed up big-time all along. When he had almost gotten his whole family killed. And he probably would have killed them, too, had it not been for Gabby coming along to save them when he did. To save all of them! And then just because his rescue plan turned out to have one slight flaw in it...

Finally, it was Gary the first to speak. “That’s pretty rough back there,” he said in a quiet voice. “And with all them kids, too.”

“Ah, don’t worry about them,” the emotions came pouring out. “Ya can’t hurt them rednecks, cause they don’t got no feelin’s. They’re too fuckin’ stupid to feel pain.”

When Gary responded to those harsh words with silence, staring at the road ahead and saying nothing back, Gabby knew immediately that he had gone too far in what he had said, that he had let himself get carried away with his anger. Because even without the use of mental telepathy, he could tell that Gary was unhappy with him now. Unhappy with some of the things he had said and done with those rednecks back there, and especially unhappy with the words that had come out of his mouth just now. And it also took no mental telepathy on his part to notice the way in which the awkward silence of their first hours together was making its unwelcomed return, growing rapidly and filling the cab once again. And in fact, it wasn't just an awkward silence anymore. No, it was something even worse, something far more alarming that he could feel taking over that shared space of theirs now. An angry silence, a hostile silence.

"Ah come on, it was an accident, brother. Ya know it was. Ya know I didn't... Cause that car just got away from me was all."

Silence.

"Cause it's like... I mean, I fucked up, okay? I went out there and tried to help them people out, but then I... I fucked up. I admit it."

Silence.

"But I gotta keep this truck movin', ya know. I can't just sit around there holdin' their hands, cause I gotta move, ya know. I got a schedule to make."

Silence.

"And ya know what it was? It's cause I got pissed off, okay? Cause like with the way that guy... I mean there we was, savin' his fuckin' ass. Him and his whole fuckin' family. But then what's he go and say to us? Does he say thank you? No fuckin' way. He just says... He bitches about what we done is what. And all because I fucked up a little bit right there at the end. All because... I mean, is that fair? Is that any way to...?"

Silence.

"Cause we deserve a thank you from them assholes, brother. A great big thank you. Me and you. Cause ya know what we done back there? We went and saved their fuckin' asses is what. All of em. Cause like if we hadn't-a got out there and moved that car for em the way we did... I mean the next truck comes by there, the next car. Wham!! Smash! They're all dead! Every fuckin' one of em. His wife, them kids. All them kids! They're all dead! All them cute little kids. Cause we like... We saved their lives is what we done! Me and you."

"Ya think so?"

"Fuckin' rights we saved em. We're fuckin' heroes, brother! They shoulda like... They shoulda give us a medal is what."

"Yeah, I guess we did save em, didn't we? Pushin' that car..."

“Fuckin’ rights we saved em! Fuckin’ rights.”

When the silence returned to the cab a short time later, there was no longer anything oppressive about it as far as Gabby could tell, nothing negative. But instead it was back to being that good old stoned-brother silence once again. That same painless silence which the two of them had enjoyed before. The one that could be allowed to linger or could be interrupted when the mood struck. Not to speak perhaps since he had no idea what more to say, but at least to sing along with a favorite song coming over the radio. Both of them singing along once again. “I hear the train a-comin’...”

The one thing Gabby couldn’t relax about right then was his speed, however. Not if he wanted to reach that truck-stop on time. And he had a lot of time to make up for now, all the time that he had lost back there making the score, plus all the time he had lost helping those rednecks. Those ungrateful rednecks. And then when he thought ahead to the time that he was still to lose when he stopped to sell the stash at his connection’s house, at Eddie’s house, he knew that there could be no kidding around. That there was nothing to do now but to drive like a bat-outta-hell. And it was a good thing for him that the freeway was practically deserted at that hour of the night, with few cars around and no police anywhere in sight, while according to what he had heard over the c.b., there weren’t even any scales open between there and the change-over point.

From time to time Gabby would look down at the clock on the dashboard as he drove, look at those hands moving ahead, always ahead. With no way to stop them or slow them down, and nothing to use against them but the arrow on the speedometer dial which he kept pushing as far to the right as he could get it. Using that little arrow as though it were in a race against the hands of the clock, as though it were somehow possible for him to catch up with them through sheer speed. And though he was hardly aware of it at the time, his thoughts were becoming ever narrower and more centered upon that race of his with each passing minute, each passing mile. His attention ever more focused upon speed and time and nothing else, even to the point where the cocaine stashed beneath the seat upon which he sat seemed to have faded from his consciousness. That bagful of artificial happiness which he had been so tempted to break into earlier on, back when the effects of those tastes which he had taken had begun to wear off, and even more so in the immediate aftermath of that incident with the rednecks when the awkward silence had made its return. Though now as he sat with his thoughts concentrated so completely upon his driving, the stuff hardly seemed to exist at all.

Time and speed his only concerns. And while Gabby had never been very good at math, still he tried to work out equations in his head as he drove along. Tried to figure that if he had so many miles to go and so much time to get there, and if he could maintain such and such a speed, then how much time would he be able to spend making the sale at Eddie’s house? He didn’t know, the calculation was far beyond his capabilities. But the one thing he knew for certain was that he wouldn’t have very long. No time for any real negotiations, not with all the time that he had lost helping those dumb-ass rednecks. So that thanks to them the stop would have to be a quick one, as quick as he could make it. Just in-and-out. Just take whatever price Eddie wanted to pay, whether he made any money on the deal or not. And it was all because of those rednecks, those goddamn rednecks.

Though would he still be able to make a profit on it? He hoped so, even if he couldn't say for sure. Not anymore. He would at least break even, though. He knew that much, that he wasn't going to take anything less than what he had paid for the stuff. But as far as any profit margin was concerned, who knew? And if he happened to make any money on the sale, of course he would share some of it with Gary. He wouldn't just pay back the forty dollars that he had borrowed, but instead he would give the guy part of the profits as well. That was the least he could do considering the favor that the big guy had done for him. So he would pay him forty-five dollars, fifty. Who knew? It all depended on Eddie.

Inconclusive as Gabby's speed-and-time calculations may have been, he knew that time was truly critical as he took the exit nearest Eddie's house and then looked for the least conspicuous place in which to leave the truck. The least suspicious place within running distance of the house. He could see that he was going to be late at the truck-stop no matter what he did, so that his only option was to take the very first offer that Eddie made, whatever it happened to be. Just take the money and run, not even pausing for a final taste of the product before handing it over.

And run was precisely what Gabby did after he pulled the truck to a stop and said, "Wait here," to his brother. He went sprinting down the street, running up to Eddie's house and banging on the door. First the door and then the windows when there was no response. Knocking and pounding as loudly as he could, completely mindless of what it can mean for a person to go running around making noise in a quiet neighborhood like that one at that godawful hour of the night. Completely unaware of the risk that he was taking.

Not until suddenly the door swung open and a gun-barrel came sticking out, pointed straight at his chest. "What the fuck do you want!?" a voice growled from behind the gun.

"Hey don't shoot, brother! It's me. It's Gabby. Don't shoot!"

Gabby returned to the truck a short time later, his nose numb from the super-fast taste which he had managed to take at a moment when Eddie wasn't looking. And he was in such a hurry that he said nothing as he jumped in and began to work his way through the gears as quickly as he could. Ignoring his passenger's expectant looks while he pulled back onto the freeway and revved the engine in a resumption of his race against the ticking of the clock. And it was only as he leveled out somewhere around maximum speed that his nerves ever began to relax enough for him to turn his attention to the brother seated beside him.

"He didn't have the cash on him," he said calmly. "But he's good for it."

"He what?" Gary sounded more incredulous than anything else.

"He didn't... You know, this time-a the night and all... But ya don't gotta worry about him cause he's good for it. I known him a long time, and he's... He's good for it."

"Whatta ya mean, he's good for it?"

"I mean like... You know, we'll get it from him the next time we come through here, cause he's..."

“We’ll what!?” Gary burst out, his voice far beyond incredulous by now. All the way to angry, extremely angry.

“Yeah, I tell ya. He’s good for it.”

“What the fuck’re you talkin’ about? Next time we come through!? I’m never comin’ through here again!!”

“Ya what...?”

“No!! Cause I’m not a trucker. I’m a hitchhiker. Remember!? And I’m not comin’ back!”

“You...? Oh shit! Ya know that’s right.” It dawned on Gabby all at once, that simple little fact which had slipped his mind so completely back there with all the hurry he had been in to make the sale and be on his way. The fact that Gary would never be coming back. And that’s not to mention the fact that he himself wouldn’t be back, either. Not when he was about to quit this truck-driving job and go fishing.

“So where the fuck is the money? Where’s my money!?” Gary demanded in a tone that showed a will and strength of character such as he hadn’t shown before. Like he was finally learning how to stand up for himself. Though as Gabby heard those words, he wondered why it was that the guy had to demonstrate his new-found sense of manhood by taking a stand against him, his very own brother. Because wasn’t there someone else that he could stand up to instead? And on top of that, why was it that the guy had to take his stand at such a volume? Speaking so loudly as to awaken Gabby’s partner.

“Hey brother, take it easy. Don’t talk so loud.”

“I’ll talk as loud as I fuckin’ please! Cause I want my money!!”

“No, don’t shout. You’ll wake up...”

“I don’t give a fuck who I wake up. I just want my money. I want it back!”

“But I don’t got it, I tell ya.”

“So go get it! Go back there and get it!!”

“I can’t do that. I can’t go back, cause he don’t got the money.”

“Well then go get it somewhere else! I don’t give a fuck where ya go. Ya just gotta get it is all.”

“But I can’t...”

“Cause ya promised me, remember? Eighty bucks! And ya said it was a sure thing.”

“Yeah, a course I promised ya.” Eighty bucks? Where the hell did he get that number from? Gabby asked himself. All he ever loaned me was forty. “And I’m good for it, too. I sure as shit am. Cause I... He’s good for it.”

“So then where is it? Where the fuck is my money!?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it for ya, brother. I’ll...”

“I ain’t your fuckin’ brother! You rip-off.”

“No man, don’t say that.” It hurt Gabby deeply to hear those words from his brother, those angry words. But he knew that it would be a waste of time to turn around and go back to Eddie’s. And since there was nowhere up ahead that he could pick up the money that he owed, nowhere before they reached Gary’s destination...

Gabby soon began to fish around in his pocket for whatever he could find there. Pulling out a couple of crumpled-up dollar bills, those along with that other one, still rolled up and ready for use, all of which he handed over to his brother. “Here,” he said. And then after a second search, he came up with a small handful of coins as well. “That’s all I got.” Though when another thought struck him a moment later, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out that last remaining joint and the small bag of pills. He didn’t bother with the two little packets of cocaine which he had managed to slip out of the stash when Eddie left the room for a moment, not when he knew that Gary wouldn’t be interested in them.

Nor in the pills, as it turned out, since his brother took only the joint from among the selection of drugs with which he was presented. “I don’t do that artificial shit,” he said quietly in a cold voice. “Only organic.”

“And I’ll get the rest for ya, I sure as shit will. Don’t worry about that, brother. I promise...”

“I told ya that I ain’t your fuckin’ brother!”

“I’ll get it for ya, I swear I will. I’ll get it... I’ll give it to ya when we meet down there in...”

“When we what!?” Gary’s voice was rising once again.

“You know. For the fishin’...”

“The fishin’!? What the fuck’re you talkin’ about? You think I’d go fishin’ with you after the way ya went and ripped me off? You think I’m that fuckin’ stupid!?”

“No, don’t... Please. Cause we still gotta...”

“Well I’m not that stupid, I’m tellin’ ya. Cause like... Weren’t you sayin’ before how I gotta start takin’ charge-a my life? Well, that’s exactly what I’m doin’ now. I’m takin’ charge!

And I'm tellin' ya right here and now that there's no way I'm ever gonna go fishin' with you. No fuckin' way!"

"No-o-o..." Gabby could hardly believe what he was hearing. The way that the last of his beautiful dream seemed to be fading away right before his eyes. That dream which had seemed so real to him just a short time ago. So well within his grasp.

"Cause I got my own dreams, and they don't got nothin' to do with fishin'. Especially not with you! They got to do with gettin' me a ship once I get down there and then livin' my own life. And livin' it my own way."

Gabby was too far gone by now to answer. He felt too drained, too utterly destroyed. As though his entire insides had just been ripped right out of him, leaving nothing behind. No happiness and no possibility of happiness. Nothing. Just a void, a meaningless existence, a pointless pursuit of survival for the sake of survival. Because what other reason could there be for him to go on living now that his brother had destroyed everything that meant anything to him? When he had taken Gabby's dreams and smashed them to bits. To nothingness.

Oh, it was horrible. So awful that things couldn't possibly have gotten any worse. Or at least that was what Gabby thought until a few moments later when suddenly events took yet another turn in that direction. When he heard a voice coming from behind him. "So you went and picked up a hitchhiker, huh?" the voice said in a tone of quiet disappointment. "And then you ripped him off."

THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The voice belonged to Daniel—not Dan—Gabby's partner. And Gabby had to struggle against his torpor, his apathy, his fast-rising sense of despair before ever he gathered the strength to turn and face his newest accuser. Turning his head for a moment only to find that by that time Daniel had already disappeared back into the sleeping compartment.

Oh shit! Now he's awake. So what else? Gabby asked himself as he glanced down at the clock to see how much time he had left. And as his eyes passed over the speedometer, noticing how drastically the speed had dropped off over the last few minutes while his attention had been on other things, his foot pushed back down on the accelerator. Because no matter how defeated and discouraged he may have felt at that moment, no matter how completely his life may have fallen to pieces, still he had a schedule to keep.

And whether he wanted to or not, Gabby was going to have to keep that schedule in silence. Unable to speak freely, unable to beg or plead or reason with his brother—his former brother—now that Daniel was lying there awake listening to every word he said. Everything he did as well, so that he couldn't even pull out a packet of cocaine and snort it up as a sort of consolation. Nothing. But instead, all he could do was to sit and wallow in his misery. So deeply entombed within the prison of his great despondency that nothing could break through to him anymore, nothing could console him. Not even the country music coming over the radio which somehow seemed to vanish before it could reach his brain. Sucked into the yawning void which

that truck-cab had become. Into the great silence which by then had gone far beyond awkward or even hostile, all the way to the inevitable, to a virtual force of nature. A silence so profound that it left Gabby with nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company as he sat behind the wheel of that big eighteen-wheeler. Nothing but those horrible thoughts, those already-painful memories of what could have been. That precious dream which had appeared to him such a short time before. Appeared and flourished and then died all in the course of a single night, leaving him rudderless, aimless, devoid of hope.

And as if the depression which was steadily growing within him, filling his soul, weren't bad enough, he also had a brand new worry to occupy some portion of his mind. He had to worry about how Daniel was going to react to what he had done, about whether the guy was going to turn him in to the company for having picked up a hitchhiker. And since this was the first time that the two of them had ever driven together as partners, Gabby had no idea what to expect. He didn't know if he was in trouble or not.

All he knew about Daniel was that he was one of the older guys, one of the steady guys. One who did his job and didn't ask questions. Didn't pick up hitchhikers and didn't do drugs and didn't arrive at change-over points late, but instead he was one of the guys who went out and got the job done, on time and on budget. And if only he had been white, he probably would have been one of the most popular drivers in the fleet, one of those who got first choice when it came time to pick driving-partners. Though being that Daniel was black, he always ended up somewhere far down the list, always getting last choice or nearly so.

And on this occasion it must have been last choice that he had gotten, or how else to explain the fact that he had ended up with Gabby as a partner. Gabby who was everyone's last choice. Avoided like the plague, though not because the other drivers didn't like him. No, they did, they liked him a lot. But the problem was that everyone knew that he couldn't be trusted, that he didn't give a damn about the job he was doing, didn't care if he got fired or not. And with an attitude like that, there was no telling what he might do while his partner was in the back asleep. Stop to pick up a hitchhiker, or stop to buy drugs, or who knew what else he was capable of doing. Gabby himself probably didn't know.

And so it couldn't have come as much of a surprise to Daniel when he awoke to discover that there was a hitchhiker in the cab. It must have been what he had been expecting in a way— Gabby thought he had detected some hint of that in the guy's voice when he heard him speak just now. But the problem was that Gabby still didn't know what Daniel was going to do about it once it came his turn to drive, or once they got back to the company offices at the end of the trip.

Daniel didn't make another appearance before their arrival at the change-over point, none that Gabby noticed, in any case, and he didn't make another sound before the truck pulled into the designated truck-stop sometime shortly after dawn. Pulled into the parking area and came to a stop, Gabby yelling, "We're there," as he began to get out.

And then as Gabby stood outside the truck, watching and waiting until his partner had descend from the cab, he made a slight gesture toward Gary with his hand as he asked, "Ya want me to tell him to get out?"

“What, here? You wanta dump him out around here?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Where’s he goin’?” Daniel asked. And when Gabby responded with the name of that city on the Gulf Coast, he came back with a quiet, “Tell him that he’s got himself a ride. Cause I wouldn’t leave a fella stuck out here.”

Whoo! Gabby breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of those words, knowing that he was safe for now.

The three of them were soon on their way toward the diner for breakfast, though as they walked along Gabby remembered all at once that he didn’t have any money with which to buy himself a meal. Not after the way he had given his last penny to Gary a short time back. And so as they drew near their destination, he turned his head all at once and spoke to his driving partner. “Hey, could I borrow a couple-a bucks to...”

“No!!”

“...get me some breakfast?”

Daniel’s answer had come so quickly and been stated so emphatically that Gabby hardly knew what to say next, how to further his case other than by getting down on his knees and begging. “I just... I run outa money is all, and I...”

“No! I said no.”

“I just wanta get me some breakfast is all. I just wanta buy me somethin’ to eat.”

“Well then why don’t you eat some-a them drugs you went and bought back there?”

“Drugs!? I didn’t buy no drugs,” Gabby said in an unconvincing tone. Gabby who should have been an expert liar given all the practice that he’d had over the years, though for some reason that wasn’t the case. Some reason having to do with his true nature perhaps, as though something inside him prevented him from ever telling a lie in a believable way.

And Daniel was clearly unimpressed by what he heard as he answered Gabby with a simple, end-of-discussion, “Yeah, right.”

So that’s it, huh? Gabby said to himself. The guy’s not gonna give in and lend me a buck or two. He’s gonna sit back and do nothing and watch me starve. Well ain’t that a helluva noise! And that means that if I’m gonna get me any breakfast today, I’m gonna have to ask Gary for... No, wait a minute, that’s not a good idea. Not after everything that happened back there.

So Gabby didn’t say another word as he accompanied the others to the bathroom and then on to the diner. Asking himself as he made the last leg of the journey why he didn’t just turn around and go back to the truck. Why he wanted to torture himself by sitting there watching those two as they ate in front of him while he had nothing, no way to appease his rumbling

appetite. Not unless one of them were to have second thoughts, that is. To give in and do the right thing in the end.

As the three of them slid into a booth together, Gabby leaned back in the far corner and pouted while Gary reached over and took a quick look at the menu, evidently looking only at the prices before putting it back without a word. And it was only Daniel who took the time to study the menu in detail, speaking up first when the waitress came to take their orders. On separate checks.

Daniel asked for a full breakfast—ham and eggs, pancakes, the works—while Gabby’s only response was a wave of his hand, a nothing-for-me gesture. And then when it came to Gary’s turn, he glanced up at the waitress briefly, shyly before mumbling out a soft, “Just coffee for me.”

“What? Just coffee?” said Daniel in surprise before turning to the waitress. “Get him the same as me, okay? And put it on my bill.”

“Yeah, make that three,” Gabby piped up quickly, sure that the opening he had been waiting for had arrived. But then before he could go on to add an I’ll-pay-you-back to his partner, Daniel cut him off cold.

“No, not him! Just him,” he said, pointing first at Gabby and then at Gary.

“Well, what the...?” Gabby whimpered once the waitress had gone. “What’re ya goin’ and buyin’ a breakfast for him for, but not for me?”

“It’s cause I feel sorry for him.”

“Ya feel sorry for him?” Gabby repeated the words with a, But not for me? inflection in his voice.

And Daniel seemed to have grasped the implied question perfectly as he went on, “Yeah, cause it’s probably not his fault. But you, I heard all about you. I know that you probably brought this whole thing on yourself.”

“Me...?”

“Yeah you. Cause I’ve heard plenty-a stories about you from the other guys. I’ve heard about all the bullshit that you’re always pullin’.”

Jesus! Talk about discrimination. Talk about condemning a guy before he even gets a chance to defend himself.

Gabby was silent after that, sitting back in his corner and pouting all the more openly as he watched the others put away their big meals. Eating right there in front of him without offering so much as a bite, even as his stomach growled audibly at the sight. And it was only Gary who hesitated at one point like he was about to say something, about to offer something from his plate. Until suddenly he was stopped in his tracks by a stern look from Daniel.

No matter how bad it got, though, Gabby swore to himself that he wouldn't be reduced to begging. Not from those two assholes, he wouldn't. And in fact, now that he thought about it, he wasn't going to say another word to either of them for the rest of the morning, the rest of the day. He wasn't going to talk about his hunger, and he certainly wasn't going to contribute to any of the dumb-ass subjects that the two of them chose to discuss as they sat at the table. Like when they started talking about southern cooking which he didn't care for at all, or at least which he didn't want to think about right then, as hungry as he was. And then when they got onto the subject of soul music, Gabby had to hold back his urge to yell, "He sucks," each time they brought up a new name. To tell them how much better rock-and-roll was than all that garbage they were talking about. Or even country music, for that matter. Some of it.

But it wasn't until Daniel began to talk about himself and his family that their words ever turned truly offensive for him, truly painful. When the guy began to open up about his life and his past in a way that Gabby never could have done, and when to Gabby's surprise—and disillusionment—he heard how Gary went right along with it. Opening up as he never had with his supposed brother. Or maybe he wasn't opening himself up exactly since Gabby never heard him say a word about himself or his past, but instead he kept agreeing with all the things that Daniel would say. Talking with him about family and brothers. Brothers! Daniel's brothers maybe, but still he was talking about brothers. Asking questions about them and throwing out comments like, "Wow," and, "That's great," and, "Ya don't say." When the only thing he ever said to Gabby during their time together had been, "Yeah right."

So how is that possible? Gabby asked himself. How can Gary be so...? How can he be such a kiss-ass? Saying whatever Daniel wants to hear and sucking up to him just because the guy went and bought him a meal. How can Gary be such a phony!? Pretending to be friends and brothers with anyone who happens to be helping him out. Giving him a ride or buying him a meal. But then the minute that anything goes wrong, the minute his so-called brother runs into some little problem, like say he has trouble paying back a loan or something like that, he just... He cuts him off cold. No more friendship, no more nothing, just a cold-shoulder and a... Oh, what a phony that guy is!

Gabby could see right through him now, see that a guy like that could never have been his brother. Not the real brother that he was searching for. Not when Gary was so willing to let a few dollars come between himself and his brother, willing to sell out to someone else for the price of a meal.

And Gabby was so disgusted by the things he was seeing and hearing as he sat at the table with those two that he just didn't care anymore, didn't care what they thought of him, those assholes who were capable of eating a big meal right in front of him while he went hungry. So disgusted that it wasn't long before he began to fish around inside the little baggie in his shirt pocket as the others looked on. Finally pulling out a handful of pills and sorting through them, selecting a couple of reds from among them before putting the rest back into his pocket and then swallowing the chosen few. Using the water in the diner to wash them down rather than dry-swallowing as he would have been forced to do had he waited until their return to the truck. And speaking of the return to the truck, by taking those pills early on like this, he would be able to get to sleep that much sooner once they got back underway. He would have that much less time to lay there listening to those two assholes, that cold-hearted Daniel and that kiss-ass Gary. That

traitor. That pretend brother who had stabbed him in the back at the first opportunity. Just like all the rest of them!

Once the three of them were back inside the truck, Gabby in the sleeping compartment waiting for the reds to do their stuff, he could hear the others as they resumed their discussion. Daniel saying, “So he ripped you off, huh?”

“Yeah, he had this deal goin’ on back there where he was gonna...”

“No, don’t say nothin’ more about it. I don’t wanta know the details.”

On and on the assholes talked, Gary saying more to Daniel than he ever had to Gabby. Gary who was just as bad as the rest of them, Gabby could see that now. See that Gary had never really been what he had seemed. Never anything more than another false alarm, another false friend whose impending brotherhood had been nothing but an illusion right from the beginning. Nothing but an impending disappointment.

“Don’t you go listenin’ to him too much,” said Daniel as Gabby’s mind began to wander away. Off in the direction of sleep and dreams, and especially in the direction of that one dream, that most wonderful of all dreams. The one about finding himself a brother at last. A true brother. A guy who would be willing to stick by him no matter what. A guy who wouldn’t sell him out for a meal or a few bucks, and maybe even a guy who would go out fishing with him someday. Sailing off into the beautiful blue ocean, with the sun shining and the fish biting at their hooks. Oh, it was going to be so great. Just Gabby and his brother out there all alone. Out on that boat with the gentle waves and the bright blue sky and the warm sun and the...

AUTHOR’S NOTE: COMING UNDONE IN THE AFTERNOON SUN

I’ve worked at many a trade in my long and varied career. I’ve been a farmworker and a logger, and I’ve sailed on vessels of nearly every description. But I have to say that of all the professions I have followed, that of commercial fisherman was the one which least agreed with me. And the problem wasn’t that fishing was the hardest job I ever did or the one with the longest hours. No, it was neither of those things. And it wasn’t the job with the most unpleasant working conditions either, but instead it was simply a job. One of many. So that if I were forced to place the blame somewhere for the bad impression which fishing left upon me, I would have to say that it was all a simple matter of bad fortune. Of the fact that I found myself working aboard a vessel with a captain and crew such as few seafaring men have ever had the misfortune to sail.

It happened at a time when the tuna fleet of Southern California still dominated the market for that particular fish. The canneries buzzing with work and employing hundreds, thousands, while the docks of San Diego would be so full of fishing vessels during the off-season that they had to tie up five and six abreast for lack of space. Though all that would be different once the season began, once the vessels were allowed to go “below the line.” Because during that

time of year there wouldn't be a single tuna boat in sight, all of them out filling their holds. All of them out making money in the way that they had been doing for decades. Generations.

Until all at once it was gone. Until over a period of a few years in the early seventies, the entire fleet sailed off to the south never to return. Driven away by the imposition of the two-hundred mile limit by certain South American countries and their exclusion of American vessels from some of the best fishing grounds, and also by a series of well-intentioned but misguided environmental regulations aimed at protecting the porpoises. Because once the owners came to realize that by the simple act of re-registering their vessels in a southern country they would be able to get around both those obstacles, it was no time at all before they were gone. Taking the jobs with them. The canneries of California soon forced to shut down and the fishermen aboard the vessels replaced by more southerly Americans. Even the captains losing their jobs in the end, once they'd had time to train their replacements.

But all that was still in the future on the day I walked into the fishermen's union hall in San Diego in search of a job. Not very far in the future, as things turned out. Only two or three years, which was just far enough for it to be completely invisible to those who made their living from the trade. Far enough for everything to be business-as-usual around the hall that day, business-as-always.

The visit proved to be an unfruitful one, however, as the only useful bit of information I managed to glean was the fact that, unlike with deep-sea vessels, the hiring on the tuna fleet wasn't done through a union hiring-hall. It was done on the docks or through long-time friendships instead. Because when I tried to move on from that point, tried to pump some of the people at the hall for leads about any possible openings, all of them clammed right up on me. Told me that things were slow, this being the off-season with few boats sailing, so that in other words, I would be wasting my time even to try. And in fact, I would be better off looking for work somewhere else altogether, in a completely different industry.

And it wasn't until after I had given up and stepped out the door and started down the street with my head hung in discouragement that things ever took a turn for the better. A voice calling out to me from behind all at once. The voice of a grizzled old fisherman, it turned out to be, as I stopped to look back at that man who had evidently followed me outside. And then as he crept cautiously toward me, glancing all around like he wanted to make sure that no one was watching, soon he began to speak in a low, almost conspiratorial tone. "I know where there's a seiner you can get on if you want it bad enough."

"Bad enough?"

"Yeah bad, that's for sure. Cause it's a bad one. But if you really want it..."

The old salt went on to tell me about a vessel that would be sailing in the next couple of days, sailing short-handed if the captain couldn't find enough men willing to go out with him, as he seldom managed to do thanks to his horrible reputation throughout the fleet. He was known as Alligator Joe, and he was said to be the meanest, most unpleasant captain on the entire San Diego waterfront. A guy for whom only the most desperate and hard-up fishermen would ever

consider working. But if I really wanted to go fishing, if I was desperate enough to work for a man like that, why then help myself.

I thanked the old guy for the information, thanked him from the heart, after which I followed the directions he had given me down to the docks and to the vessel in question. The *Defiance*, more popularly known around the fleet as the *Deviant*, as I was to find out later. And upon seeing a man standing out on the maindeck doing some sort of work as I approached, I walked right up and asked him, "Hello, is Alligator Joe here?"

"Who wants him?" he snapped back as he stopped what he was doing and turned to look me over. Examining me with suspicion as though afraid that I might be the law—or something worse. And as he stood there looking at me, I got the chance to study him a bit as well. To notice what a hard-case he was, I could see it in his eyes, in his posture. That he wasn't the sort of person toward whom I would ever want to turn my back. Not if he knew that I had a few dollars in my pocket.

After several more exchanges during which I assured him repeatedly that I was simply looking for a job, he finally went over to an open doorway and called inside, Alligator Joe making his appearance through that door a short time later. Walking unsteadily though evidently not from drink, but rather from the simple fact that he was unaccustomed to walking upon a platform that wasn't moving. The fact that for many years by then he had been making one voyage after another, returning to port just long enough to offload the catch and replenish his stores and recruit a new crew for the next voyage since few fishermen were ever so foolish or so down-on-their-luck as to make more than a single voyage under him.

Alligator Joe walked right up to me, his ragged old coat covered in dirt and with a patch over one eye. And then as he looked me up and down with his good eye, he spoke in a raspy, disagreeable voice, "You know how to throw a harpoon?"

A harpoon? I didn't know what he could be talking about since his vessel was a purse-seiner, one that used the huge net which it had piled up on its stern to catch fish. But if harpoon throwing meant that much to him, then perhaps a little lie... "As good as anyone," I told him despite the fact that I had never thrown one in my life.

Joe reached out after that to feel the muscles in my right arm. "We sail tomorrow at dawn," his final words before turning to walk away. With no further questions as to my qualifications.

The next day I was there in plenty of time to make the sailing and also to meet the other members of the crew. To meet that scurvy, unwholesome lot with whom I would be sharing the next couple of months, those dregs of the San Diego waterfront, those sweepings of its skid-row bars. Because while the man I had met the day before, the Deck Boss as he turned out to be, may have given me the impression of being an untrustworthy person of low character, I was soon to discover that he was in fact the cream of the crop. The best man in that crew which otherwise consisted of nothing more than a motley collection of drifters and hopeless alcoholics and other assorted losers. And as meanwhile reigning over that disorderly and disreputable bunch was Alligator Joe. Silent and brooding, hardly a word passing his lips except in the line of duty. With

never a kind word for anyone, never a friendly word, but simply orders instead. Cold, impersonal orders.

I saw very little of Joe as we steamed south for about a week on our way to the fishing grounds. And then once we arrived there and started to fish, I saw even less of him, it seemed. Spending all day up in the crow's nest as he did, watching for fish and giving his orders to the Deck Boss over the radio. Guiding the vessel in each time as we prepared to make a set before finally barking out the order to release the big skiff that we carried on the stern, one end of the quarter-mile-long net attached to it. Guiding us still as we circled around the school of fish and came back to the skiff to pick up that end of the net, at which point he would suddenly go silent until after the rest of the job was done. The bottom of the net pursed up by heaving in the cable that ran to the big winch on deck, trapping the fish inside, after which the whole long, heavy thing would have to be brought back aboard using the power-block on the end of the boom, hauled up and stacked on the stern ready for the next set, with only a single pause near the end when the fish had become sufficiently compacted for us to scoop them out and toss them into the holds. Because during the entire time that this process was taking place, the entire time that no orders from on high were required, there would be no sound from Alligator Joe. No sight of him throughout the working day, in fact, as instead he would sit far above in his celestial throne for hour after hot, baking hour. Looking down upon us like some sort of small-time god whose only guidance to his subjects came through his disembodied radio-voice.

And it wouldn't be until the sun was going down at the end of the day that he would finally descend to our own more human level once again, coming down to eat supper and go to bed while the vessel drifted at night. And though he seldom spoke to anyone at supper, there would always be something about him when he made his return from the crow's nest at the end of the day, something about the look in his eye, his one good eye. Because Alligator Joe would have a look of such insanity in that eye after those long hours spent in his little perch with no shade at all, the tropical sun beating down mercilessly upon his head the whole time. His bare head since he refused to wear a hat or anything else to protect himself from that brutal sun. Anything to prevent it from slowly but surely frying his brain to a golden brown.

And the only time I remember him speaking to me during those first few weeks of fishing was on one early evening when he came down with an even crazier look than usual in his eye. And when upon passing me, he stopped to ask, "Seen any swordfish?"

"No, not today..."

"Well, keep an eye out. Keep a good eye out."

Like most tuna boats, we kept a harpoon on the bow of the *Defiance*, ready for use in case we came across a swordfish. Ready to spear it and bring it aboard for the crew to eat. But as I noticed the tone in which Alligator Joe had spoken to me about swordfish just then, and remembering the question he had asked me back in San Diego about my ability with a harpoon, it soon began to dawn upon me that there was a definite pattern to his madness, an obsession which he had. An obsession with swordfish.

And that obsession came into high relief a few days later when we spotted our first swordfish—and when Joe abandoned a perfectly good school of tuna which we had been zeroing in upon in order to go after it. Telling the Deck Boss to head up to the bow, he being the best man aboard with a harpoon, and telling me to take over the steering since I was the only other semi-competent member of the entire crew. But then it was just as we were making our final approach, just as the Deck Boss was raising his arm to make the throw, that suddenly Joe told me to bring the ship about. To let that swordfish go just as we came within striking-distance.

Because as it turned out, Alligator Joe's obsession wasn't with all swordfish, but rather it was with one particular fish as he made clear to everyone aboard at supper that evening. Getting to his feet all at once and holding up a hundred-dollar bill as he announced, "This is for the first man who spots the swordfish with the crooked bill." A hundred dollars. Offered at a time when a hundred dollars was still a lot of money, not the mere pocket-change which it has become today. And offered to a crew most of whose members would gladly slit your throat for five dollars. Or less.

But day after day we went on without spotting the swordfish that he sought. Week after week, seeing only swordfish with straight bills, as all the while Alligator Joe seemed to grow ever more obsessed, ever more insane. The look in his eye becoming wilder and wilder with each passing day as he made his return from his twelve-hour brain-bake in the crow's nest.

And it wasn't until finally one day when our holds were nearly full, almost time for us to begin our journey back to the north, that we ever found the elusive fish. Spotting it just at the hottest part of the afternoon, just when the tropical sun's effects upon our captain's brain were at their most intense. Though whatever the condition of his brain may have been at the time, Alligator Joe recognized the fish from the first moment he saw it, far off in the distance. Much too far for anyone else to see the shape of its bill. Because no sooner had he spotted the distant dorsal fin than his voice came blaring over the radio. "That's it! There it is! I found it!!" he shouted in jubilation, turning an instant later to speak directly to the fish. "I've got you now. You thought you could get away from me, but you can't. Cause now I've got you. And now I'm gonna kill you! Now I'm gonna pay you back for that eye." Rambling on and on, and saying more over the next few minutes than I had heard during the nearly two months that I had been aboard.

"Get up to the bow! Get the harpoon ready!" Joe interrupted his monologue just long enough to bark out an order to the Deck Boss. And then as I took over the wheel, I followed the orders that came my way, interspersed as they were among curses and insults aimed at the fish. "Left five. Oh you little piece of crab-bait, I'm gonna get you now. I'm gonna... Midships. Steady it up there. I'm gonna eat you, ya hear? Every little bit of you. Every bite."

As we drew nearer, I was able to see the swordfish floating calmly on the surface, almost like it was asleep. And so with our prey as immobile as it was, it didn't take long for us to get close, very close. The Deck Boss raising his strong arm to make the throw and the captain whispering his instructions over the radio now as though afraid that if he were to speak out loud, the fish might hear us coming. The *Defiance* creeping closer, ever closer as we got ready to pass the sleeping fish a couple feet off our starboard bow. Closer, ever closer. Until just as the Deck Boss's arm was beginning to move, just as he was beginning to make his strike, suddenly the fish

came to life and went dashing across the bow and over to the port side, forcing the man to halt his arm in mid-throw and give chase. To try to chase it, in any case, taking a step or two in that direction only to lose his balance and go crashing to the deck, the harpoon flying from his hand as he fell. And the next thing I knew, I heard a groan of pain that came leaping from his mouth, seizing me by the heart. I heard a death-cry. One of such agony that my eyes were instantly drawn from the escaping fish to the man. The Deck Boss who had fallen directly onto the point of the harpoon, I beheld in horror as I saw how the wicked weapon had entered one side of his abdomen and come all the way out his back.

“Get it!! Don’t let it get away!!” the captain yelled over the radio as I stood at the wheel, gaping in disbelief at the blood and the gore. “Get that harpoon ready! Throw it!!”

Throw it? What was he talking about? How could I throw it when it was sticking through the Deck Boss’s body? And what were we going to do about the injured man?

Before I could ask any of those questions aloud, though, Alligator Joe was on the bow himself, having come down from the crow’s nest in record time. He was approaching the Deck Boss, though doing so with no intention of offering aid or comfort, as soon became apparent. Because instead he went directly for the harpoon, grabbed hold of the handle and then, with one foot braced on the wounded man’s chest, he yanked on it with all his strength. Pulled it right back out of the guy’s body in spite of the barbs which were there precisely to prevent his doing so. In spite of the piece of intestine which came popping out through the hole in the Deck Boss’s skin, hooked onto one of the barbs. Joe quickly shook that gruesome thing loose as the Deck Boss fell back, dead or soon to be, and as the next thing I knew he was taking that blood-stained spear straight back to the starboard bow.

This way! That way! He waved his free arm and screamed orders. And when he turned to look back at me for a moment, I saw the most horrifying sight that I ever hope to see in my life. Because even from a distance I could see that eye of his all too clearly, that window into the depths of his soul, his twisted and tortured soul. That place of such darkness, such evil, that as I looked into his eye, I seemed to be gazing all the way to the furthest limits of human depravity. Seeing before my eyes the very thing that people call Hell. A living, breathing Hell.

The sight continued to haunt me even after he had turned away. It haunts me to this day as I recall it. Though at the time I did my best to put it out of my mind and concentrate instead upon my steering as I followed the captain’s instructions. Circling around and steering the old *Defiance* back toward the swordfish which sat motionless, waiting for us once again. That swordfish with the crooked bill, that object of his obsession. And it wasn’t long before the ship was drawing within range for another try, the captain on the bow with the bloody harpoon at the ready, raising it up and leaning forward as he prepared to make the throw. Watching and waiting and leaning some more, until suddenly he gave that lance a mighty heave, stood frozen in place after that as he watched it go. Not a movement, not a sound for seconds, long seconds until I began to hear a strange, low wailing noise that came rising up from somewhere. A sound like that of a wounded animal, though it wasn’t the fish that was making the noise as I quickly came to see. No, it was Alligator Joe. It was his cry of pain at having missed his throw.

Snapping back to life moments later, he was pulling the line attached to the harpoon back aboard, getting it ready for another attempt. And he was doing so as quickly as he could. Carelessly, sloppily. Like he didn't care that the line he was pulling on was tangling up and wrapping around everything. Or at least it was wrapping around him, around his feet and even around one of his arms. Because he was in far too much of a hurry to notice a little thing like that, such a hurry that he was completely helpless when all at once something gave a mighty tug on that line. When the swordfish bit onto it, evidently, and pulled with an irresistible strength, pulled Joe right along with it. Pulled him straight over the side and straight under the water. Down, down, never to be seen again.

My first instinct when I saw him go over the bow was to ram the throttle into the stop position, not wanting to run over him with a spinning propeller. But then as though the engine had a mind of its own, somehow it jumped straight into full astern. The whole ship shaking and rattling as I fought to regain control, moving the throttle up and back, up and back, all to no avail. And meanwhile the ship rattling away like it was about to fall apart, rattling like there would soon be nothing left. Rattling away until all at once the shaking ceased and the engine raced madly, all resistance gone in an instant as the entire propeller shaft went sliding backwards into the sea, taking with it who knew how much of the engine and even the hull. And as suddenly water began to pour into the engineroom.

"Abandon ship!" I yelled a moment later when it became clear that the Engineer was too drunk to do anything about the flooding. Clear that the old *Defiance* was on her way to the bottom. Taking with her the already-dead Deck Boss and all those other crewmembers who were too weak or too incompetent to save themselves. All of them, every last one of them, so that only I survived. Only I lived to tell the tale.

PART V

THOUGHT

In which the intellect considers the significance of that which has been named and recalled and colored by the emotions.

ENTER GABRIEL

Gabriel liked his name but he didn't like it. He liked the fact that it was different, that he was always the only Gabriel in the schools he attended, but at the same time he didn't like the way it sounded. So stiff and old-fashioned. Which was why he decided to change it once he reached the age of reason. To keep what he liked about the name while converting it into a form that sounded more modern and mainstream. More gentele. He decided to start calling himself Gabe.

It wasn't that Gabe had anything against being Jewish, though. No, far from it. He was proud of his heritage. Proud of the way it made him stand out as one of the few Jewish kids in that northern Midwest town where he was raised. Because thanks to that part of his background, he never had to be just another small-town hick like so many of those with whom he grew up. Instead, he could always be so much more: the heir to a long and glorious tradition of hard work and accomplishment, of service in the advancement of the human race. And seeing himself ever more in that light as he grew older, he soon swore that he was going to live up to that tradition no matter what the cost. He was going to fight to make the world a better place in which to live. A place of justice and freedom.

He wasn't going to turn out like his parents or his brothers with their go-along-get-along attitude. Their make-no-waves and their virtual abandonment of their Jewish identity, as far as he was concerned—not the religious aspect of it which he didn't miss at all, glad to have been brought up secular, but rather the social and political side of it. So that for him, while he didn't want to make waves simply for the sake of making them, he also refused to remain silent in the face of what he considered to be injustice and ignorance. As though it were his duty as a human being, as a Jew, to speak out and take action whenever it was called for. Because if he didn't act, then who would? And if he didn't speak up and say what needed to be said, then how would he ever lead the people into the Promised Land in the way that he was destined to do someday? He was sure that he was, that he would someday make that fondest childhood dream of his into a reality. That dream—or perhaps it was a scene from an old movie—in which the hero goes marching down the middle of the street with a banner held high, and where all the people come out to join him. All of them. Even the bad guys who see the light in the end. Even they come around to his way of thinking. Even they become part of his parade.

Oh, what a wonderful dream it was! The only problem being the fact that it was such total fantasy. So far out of touch with reality as Gabe was to learn the hard way when he began to take

his first small steps into the political arena. A young kid completely unprepared for the violent reaction which his actions were to provoke from those who were opposed to the advancement of the human race. Those who preferred stagnation.

What happened was that one day when he was in junior high, Gabe decided to voice his support for the Civil Rights Movement which was so much in the news at the time. He decided to write a few slogans on his book-covers and even paste a picture of Martin Luther King onto one of them. But then the next day as he was showing off the covers to his friends at school, he got a reaction which he hadn't been expecting at all. He got attacked by a whole group of kids. Racist kids who beat him up and tore the book-covers apart, calling him a kike and a nigger-lover and a lot of other things in the process. And giving him his first hard lesson on the realities of social change.

But Gabe refused to back down. He refused to let those kids stop him. Because how could he give up when he was fighting for truth, for justice, for human dignity? How could he betray something like that? He couldn't, of course. And so when he got home from school that afternoon, the first thing he did was to sit down and make a whole new set of covers for his books. Covers on which he wrote even more slogans than he had on the first ones. And covers which were soon torn apart by the racists only to be replaced by a third set and a fourth and a fifth. Until finally the racists gave up.

Finally they came to realize that he wasn't going to back down no matter what they did to him. That he was going to keep flashing those awful slogans of his around town and there was nothing they could do to stop him. Those slogans which they found so hateful. Phrases like "We shall overcome" and like "Black and white together." Those horrible, offensive slogans. But what more could they do when the guy was being so stubborn about it? Like the commie jerk seemed to think that he was in the right or something like that.

Seemed to believe, as Gabe certainly did, that he was fighting the good fight. He never had a doubt about it. Convinced that he was fighting for the future of the human race. And he meant the whole human race, including the segment of it which lived in that backward little town of his. That place so far behind the times that the use of the word nigger remained popular around there long after it had gone out of fashion in the rest of the region.

And Gabe was also sure that he was in the right when he undertook his next big fight as well. When during the latter part of his high school career, he decided to come out against the war in Vietnam. When inspired by the anti-war movement which was just then being born in Berkeley and other places, he became the first kid in town to wear a peace symbol to school—the footprint of the Great American Chicken as some people called it at the time. And he might have taken his protest even further, too, had there only been some way for him to do so. Some local symbol of the military-industrial complex to protest against other than the town's National Guard Armory. But even with as little as he did, simply wearing a peace symbol pinned to his shirt, still it was enough to set off a whole new round of attacks from the town's right-wingers. Attacks from them and defiance from Gabe. Principled defiance.

And it wasn't until his senior year that Gabe ever came up with a way to take the next big step in his campaign of protest—and to shake things up around that town for real—when he

decided to let his hair grow out long, he and a couple of his friends. Not just Beatles-long but all the way out like in the pictures he had seen from San Francisco. Hippie-long. Because from that point on, the reaction against him became so widespread as to be nearly universal, with the hostility coming not only from the usual right-wing suspects but from the school's entire jock-community. From all the jocks and jock-wannabes and jock-hangers-on and jock-girlfriends. Even from his own brothers and other people who had quietly supported him back in the civil rights days, said nothing about the peace symbol. Even they reacted to his lengthening hair with taunts and teasing and dirty looks, as though the presence of a small group of guys with long hair somehow offended their entire sense of manhood. A group of guys who looked like girls! While in Gabe's case, with his curly hair puffed out in a sort of white-man's Afro, he actually looked like a black girl!! And it was all so abhorrent to them, so threatening to all concerned, that throughout the remainder of the school year, they never passed up an opportunity to voice their disapproval. To yell insults at Gabe and his friends and to question their gender. To attack them physically whenever they got the chance.

But while the condemnation by those guys—and by their girlfriends, too—may have been virtually unanimous throughout the remainder of their high school careers, there were some interesting changes which were to take place in their attitudes over the succeeding years. Attitudes not only toward long hair but toward a whole lot of other things as well, as it was only the most hardcore among them who ever managed to make the usual smooth transition from reactionary adolescence into reactionary adulthood. That transition which has been so much easier for members of other generations to make. Because for the members of Gabe's generation, things were to become far more problematic. Some of them going off to Vietnam over the next few years and taking part in the Great Blunder, coming back later, those of them who did, so utterly changed as to be nearly unrecognizable. Disillusioned and many of them filled with an anger so intense yet so unguided that it was as likely to be aimed in one direction as in another. Toward those who opposed the war or toward those who supported it. Toward the people they had supposedly gone over to help or toward the government which had sent them there or toward the whole world or simply toward themselves. And by the time their emotional smoke had cleared, it was generally to discover that either they had gone over to Gabe's side with a passion or else they had gone very much the other way. Taken their hatred of anything and everything that he stood for to a nearly pathological level.

Then there were those other classmates of his who went off to college rather than war, off to distant cities and towns where they were to undergo an evolution in their thinking over the next few years which, while it may have been less dramatic than that of the first-mentioned group, still it was every bit as curious. Because it didn't take long for their ideas and attitudes to begin changing once they found themselves in those new and more open-minded environments. Changing so rapidly that before long most of them had gone hippie themselves. More-or-less. The men letting their hair grow out long—in most cases noticeably longer than Gabe's hair had ever been—while men and women alike smoked pot and dropped acid. And in the process of conversion, they all seemed to forget rather conveniently about the way they had treated Gabe and his friends back in high school. All memory of their heated words and hostile actions having been blotted out somehow, having vanished into thin air.

Not that any of it mattered to Gabe since by then he had already put it so far behind him. Already dismissed those attacks and those insults as nothing more than the ramblings of a bunch

of ill-informed yokels. Forgettable and forgotten from the moment of his arrival at college. Because what he found when he got to that new school, that new life, turned out to be so liberating that he never again worried about those old hometown battles, preferring instead to revel in the new world he had entered. That world in which it was not only acceptable for a person to think in the way that he did, but where it was positively encouraged. Up to a point. That world where people cared about humanity and the issues of the day, and where at least some of them cared about stopping the war as well. Cared enough to put it all on the line in the anti-war movement whose local version was just taking shape when he arrived on campus.

Gabe went to the first anti-war rally that he heard about shortly after his arrival in town. And while the gathering that day may have been pathetically small, still there was something he loved about the energy of the people involved. Their focus, their commitment. Loved it so much that immediately afterwards he went seeking out the leaders to offer them his services. Jumping in with such enthusiasm, in fact, that soon he was dedicating every free minute to the cause and helping out in any way that he could, whether by printing up handbills and distributing them or by making signs or doing whatever else was asked of him. Though what he especially loved to do in those days whenever he got the chance was to participate in the endless rounds of political discussion that were such an integral part of the movement.

Gabe could do little more than listen at the beginning, however, the flood of new ideas coming his way much too overwhelming for a small-town kid like him who had never heard anything like it before and whose only acquaintance with most of the ideas being discussed came from his reading and nowhere else. Not until now when suddenly they were all coming at him at once. Marxism of every hue and Anarchism and Pacifism and a whole lot of other isms both old and new. So many of them that he hardly knew what to think or how to respond. Not during the early months anyway, not until after he'd had time to grow into it a bit. To learn and adapt and finally come into his own in that white-hot intellectual atmosphere within which he had so suddenly found himself immersed.

And in the same way that Gabe was rapidly growing into his role within the movement as the weeks and months of his freshman year ticked by, so the movement itself was starting to gather steam, with the demonstrations they organized getting bigger all the time. Month by month, and especially from that year to the next since that was the time when the movement against the war was entering into its glory years, both nationally and locally. The talk of the town by his sophomore year, whether for or against, as by then the demonstrations seemed to attract nearly everyone, other than the local reactionaries. Huge gatherings that were almost as much social events as they were political. Chances to see and be seen.

With that campus of theirs being as far off the beaten track as it was, they were spared the worst of the factional-split within the movement which came with the breakup of the SDS, their supposed parent-organization, at its national convention that June. Because with relations within the tight-knit radical community of that isolated university town being as much personal as they were political, the factionalism barely went beyond the occasional heated discussion, with some of the hardcore activists pushing for aggressive tactics in the Weathermen vein while others defended non-violence. Though at the same time that those so-called leaders may have been little affected by the split, it was to have a quieter but far more insidious impact upon the lower ranks of the movement over the coming school year, his junior year, with more and more of the soft-

core supporters beginning to drift away. Some of them scared off by all the talk about violence while others were turned off by a New Left that was starting to look far too much like the Old Left, and while others were simply bored with the whole thing, considering demonstrations to be so last-year. Their short attention spans having reached their limits.

There was a major revival that spring thanks to the killings at Kent State, a brief period during which Gabe and his friends were back in their glory, at the peak of their power, in fact, as they actually managed to shut down the entire university. If only for a couple of days. After that, though, the slow but steady decay of the movement was to set back in with little relief. The demonstrations during his senior year growing smaller all the time even as they became ever more militant. Trashing and clashes with the police so commonplace by then as to have lost their novelty and thereby their newsworthiness as well. So predictable and so old-news as far as the mainstream media was concerned that soon it was declaring the entire movement dead despite the steady stream of demonstrations, as numerous as ever if not more so. Numerous but largely ignored as the media began to fall into line behind a whole new “standard narrative” in the same way that it always seems to do. Exaggerating the movement’s decline just as the earlier narrative had exaggerated its rise, and thereby creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Killing the movement slowly but surely, whether wittingly or not. Killing it even as Gabe and the others struggled to keep it alive.

In the midst of all that large-scale drama, that tragic rise-and-fall both nationally and locally, Gabe’s own personal rise within the hierarchy of the local movement was to go on uninterrupted, however. Always one of the top leaders by the second half of his college career, if not the very top, he was one of those that the others would turn to at crucial moments. One who would be called upon to speak at every rally and demonstration.

And there was even one occasion when he was asked by local media to engage in a public debate with some right-wing champion over the issues of the day. Some brain-dead conservative, as the guy turned out to be. Some jerk-off who tried to make up for his lack of ideas and arguments by resorting to insults and name-calling and even thinly disguised racial slurs. Saying so many stupid things during the course of the debate and pushing so many of Gabe’s buttons, pushing them again and again, that before long Gabe found himself yelling and screaming at the idiot despite his earlier resolution not to lose his temper. Because what else could he do when that Nazi-bastard refused to admit that he was wrong? Repeating his mistaken charges time and time again even after Gabe had refuted them so utterly and completely. And it wasn’t until Gabe answered one of the asshole’s accusations with a right-cross that finally the debate arrived at its logical conclusion.

As you might expect given that and similar public displays over the years, Gabe managed to develop quite a reputation for himself around that college town. A reputation among the local left as a true fighter and one among the right as a card-carrying communist. Though the truth of the matter was actually something milder and more prosaic than either of those two extremes. The truth was that he was an independent, free-thinking radical who just happened to have a bad temper.

Because Gabe was never a standard-issue leftist. He was always a guy who insisted upon thinking for himself, taking nothing on faith. And he was just as likely to flex his free-thinking

muscles in a leftward direction as he was toward the right, daring to pose awkward questions to himself and to others about some of the most widely accepted left-wing dogmas and assumptions of the day. Like for instance, even before the movement entered into its years of decline, he had already begun to ask what was going to happen once the war came to an end. Because while it may have seemed at the time like the war was going to go on forever, Gabe knew that sooner or later it was bound to end. That the U.S. was bound to pull the troops out eventually. And then once that had happened, what would become of their movement? What single, unifying issue would they have left to organize themselves around? Or in other words, what would they still have going for themselves at that point besides a bunch of interest-group issues? And if the movement was going to devolve into a sort of interest-group radicalism in the future, then what place would there be left in it for a white, heterosexual male like him?

Gabe wanted to know. And as he pondered that and similar questions, he soon found himself wondering all the more openly about why it was that the New Left was so dismissive of the labor movement, that long-time bastion of the left. Why it was that none of the activists showed the least interest in organized labor, attacking it instead as part of the establishment which they were fighting against. Because didn't they realize that what they should be doing was embracing it instead? Or how did they expect ever to make a revolution without the working-class behind them? A real revolution. Did they actually believe all that stuff they were saying about minorities and students being the vanguard of the revolution? Apparently they did. But if so, didn't they realize that most of the minorities they were talking about were actually workers themselves? So then why would they want to set those minority workers against the white ones? Why would they want to divide-and-defeat their own movement in that way? And the students? They only held that status for a few short years, so that the entire movement could crash and burn in no time at all if it failed to recruit whole new crops of leaders year after year. And so given all those facts, why would the New Left want to ignore labor, and especially organized labor? Couldn't they see that the working-class was the only future they had? The only possible source of any long-term growth and strength. So that if they ever wanted to survive and prosper, they would have to join forces with the working-class in the end. The whole working-class. White, heterosexual males and all.

Gabe thought about those things more and more as his college career progressed. And he had already begun to develop a vague plan of action somewhere in the back of his mind even before his last summer break when, thanks to a union connection through a friend in the movement, he got a chance to spend a couple of months working aboard a ship sailing on the Great Lakes. It was an idea about setting himself up as a sort of one-man organizing campaign in some industry or other, an idea which seemed to be very much reinforced by everything that he saw and heard over the course of that summer. Because when he was out there on the Lakes, it all seemed to make so much sense to him. It all seemed to fall right into place. Even the older seamen good union men despite the reactionary views which many of them may have held on a lot of other topics, so that if he could just find some way to get through to them and show them where their true interests lay, he might be able to bring them around someday. While when it came to the younger seamen that he met, they seemed like a very promising bunch. A fertile ground for the spread of progressive ideas, Gabe was sure that they were.

And so given all that positive reinforcement which he received while aboard ship, his plan was to grow ever more solid during his senior year. So solid that by the time he graduated at

the end of the year, Gabe knew exactly what it was that he wanted to do with his life: he wanted to work—and organize—on the Lakes full-time. He had no worries about the draft thanks to a lucky draw in the lottery, and he had no job prospects waiting for him within his field of study either, thanks to his earlier decision to pursue a useless degree in political science.

Totally useless, as he and everyone knew, though still that didn't stop his parents from complaining when they heard about his plans. Asking why he didn't go to medical school like his older brother, to law school like what his younger brother was planning on doing. Why he wanted to throw away his entire education, his future, by becoming a common sailor.

When it came to his girlfriend's opinion, she didn't care one way or the other anymore, having recently dumped him in favor of some future lawyer. So that with no one left to please but himself, his parents' complaints entering one ear and exiting the other, it was with complete peace of mind that Gabe set out upon his new path in life when he came to the end of his college career, convinced that he was doing the right thing. Convinced that while he was out on the Lakes, he would be able to sow the seeds of a radical new future. Organizing and proselytizing and "boring from within" as he laid the groundwork for the coming Revolution.

Sailing on deck for many months at a time as he did, it wasn't long before he began to lose touch with the movement back at the university. He would return there occasionally when he had free time during the first year or two after graduation, visiting old friends and participating in any demonstrations that happened to take place. But then came the moment when the war ended at last. When U.S. troops were finally pulled out and when, just as Gabe had been predicting, what was left of the movement fell dead overnight. Some of the activists turning to other issues at that point—women's rights or gay rights or affirmative action—while others dropped out altogether. Immersed themselves in personal issues instead—career and family and relationships—and left the movement forever.

The collapse so sudden, so complete that Gabe soon came to the conclusion that there was no reason for him ever to return to that school again. No reason to be a witness to what for him was a precipitous decline in the quality of student life. Perhaps a decline in the students themselves as the activists and progressives of one year gave way to the Me Generation of the next—to the first of what would prove to be a whole string of Me Generations, in fact, stretching on for decade after decade. Clear to the present moment. And in the same way, the passions and social-consciousness of the late sixties seemed to give way all at once to the Great So What of the seventies. Those years during which Nixon was finally driven from office. But so what! Years when the war finally ended, truly ended. When Saigon finally fell. But so what! Only the true believers on one side or the other celebrated the victory or mourned the defeat, while hardly anyone else seemed to care—or even to notice.

The hippie movement disappeared in those days as well, disappeared without a trace. Not that it meant anything to Gabe who had never considered himself to be a hippie, only having worn his hair long in school as a sign that he was part of the movement, and then keeping it somewhat long later on as an aid in making connections with the most progressive of the young seamen he met out on the Lakes. And it was much the same when it came to marijuana which he only smoked for socio-political reasons. What happened with the hippie phenomenon, though, was that it fell victim to its own success, having spread so far and so fast, and having become so

diluted in the process that in the end it had lost whatever meaning it may once have had. It had become a fad, plain and simple. Long hair and drugs and nothing more. Finally reaching the point where there were so many hippies around that suddenly there were no hippies anywhere. Because once everyone had become a hippie, then no one was a hippie any longer.

As it happened, it was just at the same time that all those things were coming to fruition, just as the Great So What of the seventies was reaching its highest peak, all things sixties issuing their last pathetic whimper, that Gabe found his own life to have reached a crisis-point as well. The disillusionment sky high as everything that he had been working and fighting for over the years seemed to have come to nothing. His one-man organizing campaign on the Lakes was going nowhere, that fact had become too clear to be denied any longer. And since he refused to join forces with Marxist groups of any stripe, never having been a Marxist himself despite what the right-wingers back at college may have said, he seemed to be left with no future at all. No Revolution up there or anywhere else in the United States, so that all his hopes and plans of recent years had been a waste, nothing but a huge waste of time. As big a waste as the whole anti-war movement had been. And in fact, they had even been as big a waste as all the time and attention which he had lavished upon his latest girlfriend—that treacherous b-word—only for her to drop him a few months before. Leave him for some guy who didn't work aboard ships, some guy who would always be there for her rather than being out on the Lakes.

So with all those problems coming to a head at once, the personal as well as the political, Gabe knew that the time had come for him to make a clean break with his past. Time for him to leave the Great Lakes and head off in search of new horizons. Off to see the world perhaps, or at least to see a bit more of the country. And hopefully in the process he would be able to put his brand new Mate's license to work as well, doing so aboard a whole new type of ship. Because now that he had taken the Coast Guard exam and become certified as a Mate, he found himself faced with a certain dilemma. Found that if he wanted to use his new license and sail as a Mate on the Lakes, he would have to join a different union, one in which he would be forced to start all over again at the bottom. And so as he saw it, there was nothing for him to lose by heading off and starting over somewhere else instead. In a whole new nautical world.

Perhaps sailing on the Gulf of Mexico, the plan had soon come together in his head once he had that fresh new ticket to the world in hand. Down at a place where the endorsements on his license would be good enough to get him work on a supply-boat running out to the oil-rigs, one of those ships which, despite their size, were able to sail as "uninspected" vessels of under two-hundred tons thanks to a series of builder's tricks. Because according to what he had been told, if he were to work on those ships long enough, like say a year or something like that, he would be able to get the Great Lakes-only restriction removed from his license while retaining its unlimited tonnage endorsement. Or in other words, he would be able to convert it into an unlimited license, any size ship sailing anywhere in the world. And so despite the fact that he had no idea whether those stories he had heard were true or not, the potential reward was so great as to make it worth the time and effort to go down to the Gulf and find out. To go spend a few months in that strange and exotic land known as the South.

To go first of all to a major port city located along the Gulf of Mexico where Gabe was to arrive just as the Great So What Summer was about to begin. The summer following the fall of Saigon and the deafening indifference that accompanied it. The loud-and-clear, So What! as all

those years of hope and struggle, those years of tears and joy, of blood and sacrifice, came down to that one final moment. To that victory or that defeat or whatever it might have been. That victory which tasted so bitterly of defeat.

Because it was just then, just at that darkest moment of his entire life, that Gabe's bus pulled into his chosen city on the Gulf—his girlfriend having taken their car—and he got himself a room in an old hotel that someone had told him about. A cheap-but-clean place that catered to seamen, charging them only eleven dollars a week to stay there, and one which he had decided to patronize not because he was short on cash, only short on hope and pride, so that what he sought was a place to fit his present mood. His existential despair. His self-pity. And from the moment he arrived and saw that hotel, he knew that he had found exactly what he was looking for. Knew that he had found a new home.

The building was a fairly rickety-looking old wooden structure located in a bad part of town. Bad enough anyway, being in a neighborhood that was not far from the shipping channel and one that was low-class not so much because of what was there but rather because of what was missing. Because of all the empty spaces to be seen, all the vacant lots filled with weeds or rubble or both, while most of the rundown commercial buildings were either empty or else they contained marginal businesses that were there for no other reason than the low rent. Though fortunately for the people staying at the hotel, there were also a few low-grade eating establishments located within walking distance, most of them fast-food joints. And at the same time there were several broken-down little bars nearby, all of them so cheap and dirty as to give a whole new meaning to the word dive. When it came to the hotel itself, it had very little to offer its clients. A bed and a chair and a dresser and a table, clean but Spartan. While in the lobby there were a number of heavily-worn sofas and chairs scattered about facing an under-sized TV set, the only television in the whole building.

And the guests staying there? They had to be the biggest bunch of losers that Gabe had ever seen. A bunch of guys from the very lowest class of seamen. Push-boat guys, most of them, guys who worked as deckhands on the push-boats that plied the rivers and the intercoastal canal, and guys who never would have made it anywhere else. Gabe could see that from the first moment, that none of those guys would have measured up on the Lakes. They were all so scrawny and dissipated. And so stupid, too, none of them having enough sense to form a union, but instead taking whatever scraps the companies happened to offer them.

Between jobs, those losers would stay at that old hotel. Paying flophouse prices and drinking in the nearby dives each night until their money ran out and they had to go back to work, had to take whatever low-paying job they could find and then hold it down just long enough to pay for another round at the hotel. And if they got lucky, they might not even have to leave the hotel to find that next job, might get it through Miss Flossy, the tough-old-gal who owned and ran the place and saw to it that it was kept clean and quiet. Because given the fact that so many of her clients worked on the push-boats, the captains would sometimes call her up when they needed a deckhand. Needed one so desperately as to go to her, knowing full well that what they would find at her hotel were the dregs of the dregs. Winos and bums who wouldn't last a week on the job.

So it was a low-class group of people among whom Gabe found himself living at that hotel. As low as they come, it seemed to him. But since he felt so degraded himself at the time, they seemed like the perfect companions in his misery. The few of them with whom he ever spoke, that is, since with him being such a yankee and they such southerners, he hardly knew how to relate to them at all. He didn't know what to say beyond hello. And so instead he kept mainly to himself when he was at the hotel, either brooding silently in his room or sitting alone before the TV in the lobby. Alone despite the presence of others.

And it wasn't until late on the third day of his stay that an event occurred which was finally to shake Gabe out of his lethargy. When as he sat in an old chair in the sweltering heat of the lobby, watching the evening news at the end of day three in his futile search for work among the supply-boat companies, a new guy came walking into the hotel. A big guy, tall and strong and impressive-looking. One who through his mere presence seemed to raise the quality of the entire establishment. He walked in with a little seabag on his shoulder, road-dirty and with something in his gait to indicate that he had been walking for a long time and that his legs were dog-tired. He walked in and went right up to Miss Flossy who happened to be behind the counter at the time, and he asked her for a room.

"We're full," she told him as she glanced up and began to look him over, that big, good-looking guy with the shaggy brown hair. Long enough to make him a true member of his own generation though not so long as to be threatening to someone of Miss Flossy's. The big guy's shoulders seemed to droop in disappointment at the news, though an instant later Gabe thought he noticed something else as well. As though there were some strange reaction taking place on the part of Miss Flossy, something inside her responding to the guy in the way that so many women respond to men like him. Even women of Miss Flossy's age, evidently. Because the next thing Gabe knew, she was reviving his hopes. And hers.

"There's one chance, though," she said before going on to tell him about some guy who was supposed to have checked out a few hours back but who must have changed his mind. Some off-and-on resident of the hotel who had a job waiting for him aboard a push-boat on the canal, but who had apparently decided that he didn't want the job after all. Either that or he was simply too drunk or too lazy to get up and get going. And when the big guy asked her in reply if it would be okay for him to go upstairs and like... You know, go up and talk to the guy about... you know, about the value of work and stuff like that, Miss Flossy gave him an almost coquettish smile as she nodded her assent.

Gabe was immediately intrigued by what he saw. By the way in which the big guy had spoken, so softly and yet so solidly. With such manliness in his voice. And also by the way in which the old lady actually seemed to be flirting with him. It was a very interesting development, Gabe thought, the first interesting thing that had happened since his arrival at the hotel. And things only grew more interesting when the big guy reappeared a short time later with a skinny little wino-looking guy in tow, carrying the guy's bag in one hand and nearly dragging him by the shoulder with the other.

"He's ready to check out," the big guy said to Miss Flossy as he set the bag down near the front door. "So go ahead and call him a taxi."

“No wait a minute, I ain’t...” the little guy whined.

Only to be cut off by the big guy. “Now you remember what we was talkin’ about upstairs, don’t ya? About how ya gotta start takin’ charge-a your life. Ya remember that, don’t ya?”

“But I don’t...”

“Come on now, man! You’re not backin’ out on me, are ya?” The big guy spoke sharply, threateningly. And then as the little guy clammed up, as he looked at Miss Flossy who stood dialing the phone with eyes averted, as he glanced over at those seated before the television set with a look of please-help-me in his eyes, soon the big guy went on. “Ya gotta take charge-a your life, man. Ya know what I mean? Ya gotta go out there and do it. Cause like, ya wanta work on that push-boat, so ya just go on out there and do it!”

“But I don’t wanta...”

“Yes ya do!” the big guy cut him short once again. “Don’t ya remember? We was just talkin’ about it upstairs. So go ahead now. Give the lady back her key.”

“But...”

“Give her the key!” he snarled in a voice so hard that it left the little guy quivering. Looking ever more beseechingly at Miss Flossy, practically getting down on his knees and begging for her help, as the big guy went on in a more soothing tone. “Ya gotta take charge, man. Like I was tellin’ ya. Ya gotta go out there and get yourself that job, and ya gotta... Ya see what ya wanta do in your life, and ya do it! Ya know what I mean? Ya want that job so ya go out there and get it, and ya... ya take charge-a your life.” A brief pause before adding more forcefully than ever, “So give the lady back her key!”

By this time Gabe had lost all interest in the television with its endless stream of commercials and the occasional snippet of news interspersed amongst them, but instead his attention had become completely absorbed in the events which were taking place on the other side of the lobby. And he sat watching those events with growing fascination, deeply intrigued by everything he saw. By that old lady who seemed to have gone deaf and blind all at once, refusing to see or hear a thing as she stared off into the distance and avoided the little man’s eyes at all costs. And by that little guy who seemed to shrivel ever smaller with each passing moment, his resistance to the inevitable becoming ever more pathetic. And especially by that big guy who went on and on with his slow-motion attempt at persuasion, pausing for long periods as they awaited the arrival of the taxi, and resuming his harangue only when it appeared that the little guy was about to speak. Starting back up himself to preempt each whining complaint with further repetitions of his three or four pet phrases. Those phrases which had soon grown so familiar to Gabe as to be able to sing along, though still there was something that he found strange about them, about tone in which they were spoken. Something indecipherable that seemed to grow more pronounced and more mysterious with each repetition. A sign of some deeper, hidden meaning behind the words, he thought it might be, of some unknown back-story. Or then again, maybe it was simply a tone of irony, perhaps even sarcasm. Though whatever the

nature of that tone may have been, it was always followed by a phrase whose tone left no room for doubt. "Give back the key!"

But still the little guy refused to budge, making no move toward the door and no effort to retrieve the key from his pocket. And while Gabe knew in his head that he should have been pulling for that little guy, that victim of oppression being pushed around by someone who was so much bigger than him, somehow his heart felt nothing of the sort. No sympathy and no sense of pity and no outrage at the injustice of the situation, either. But instead the only thing he felt right then was sympathy for the other side. For the "justice" of the big guy getting his way and being allowed to stay on at the hotel. And if the guy had to accomplish that end through sheer force, then so be it. Because the only one to blame around there was that little guy, Gabe was soon telling himself. He was the one who stood in the way of progress, and if he would just get the hell out of there, then everything would be fine, his departure making room for that other guy who was so clearly his evolutionary superior. That guy who seemed to represent everything that Gabe stood for. The advancement of the human race. Or at least he represented a distinct improvement in the quality of the people staying at that hotel. And the more Gabe thought about it, the more convinced he became that things would work out best for all concerned if that other guy would just get out and go to work. Even for the little guy in the long-run since by taking the job, he would be able to "take charge-a his life" at last.

And Gabe was sure that Miss Flossy must have felt much the same given her passivity in face of the little guy's pleading looks. Her washing-of-the-hands which became especially blatant when she turned and started to walk away just as the taxi appeared outside the hotel, and as the struggle entered its decisive phase. The big guy grabbing the other man by the arm and practically shouting into his ear, "Give the lady back her key and get the hell outa here!!"

"But I don't wanta go," the little guy whimpered. "Please!" he called out to Miss Flossy's retreating back. "Please..."

"Gimme that key," the big guy said once again as he reached down and started to rummage through one of the little guy's pockets. First in one and then in another. And as he did so, the only resistance he met was passive, as though the little guy had resigned himself to his fate already, his impending defeat. So that when the big guy finally came up with the key and deposited it on the counter, his undersized victim gave no response. He said nothing and did nothing beyond a last, lingering glance which he cast at all those seated in the lobby as he was being led toward the door. A look of desperation on his face, despair which was met with nothing but silence, however. Indifference on the part of everyone present as they watched him being dragged outside and deposited in the waiting taxi.

Because no one was on the little guy's side, that much was clear. No one was sorry to see him go, showing no signs of any emotion other than relief as they watched the taxi drive off with him inside. And then no sooner was the guy gone than suddenly the place came back to life. Especially so in the case of Miss Flossy who returned to the counter moments later, back to her same old self once again. Or even more than herself, it seemed, acting so much friendlier and more outgoing than Gabe had seen her before. Looking up into the big guy's eyes in some weirdly meaningful way and telling him that she would have to go clean the room before she could let him in, though in the meantime he could leave his bag behind the counter. A smile after

that as the guy said, Fine, no problem. One last smile of approval before disappearing up the bare wooden steps leading to the second floor.

The big guy stood there indecisive following her departure. Though when he turned a moment later to look around the room, his eyes briefly meeting those of Gabe who was slow to look away, the next thing Gabe knew, the guy was walking over toward where he sat. "Hey, uh..." he began with an air of shyness in his voice that was totally at odds with the way in which he had been speaking up until then. "Do you, uh..."

Gabe would have liked to ignore the guy if only that had been possible, though at the same time he was eager to make his acquaintance. His head and heart very much at odds. Because while he feared the loss of all that precious isolation which he had been building up over so many months, even years, the loss of all the safety and security of his overwhelming self-pity, he also longed for friendship and human contact. He longed for life and happiness and everything else that the big guy looming above his chair seemed to represent at that moment. And it wasn't until he spoke that he ever became aware of which side it was that was coming out on top in that internal struggle of his. Not until he heard himself say, "Hi there," in a tone which was far friendlier than he would have imagined possible.

"Hi. I uh... I wonder if ya could tell me where there's a good place to eat around here. Cheap."

"A good place? Here!?" Gabe laughed slightly as he spoke. "There are plenty-a cheap ones around here, but I don't know about any good ones."

"Okay then, how bout a cheap one?"

"Yeah, sure..." Gabe began as, hardly conscious of what he was doing, he found himself rising from his chair, standing up to meet the guy face-to-face. Eager despite himself to get to know this first interesting person he had met in such a long time. And soon he was telling the guy, "Come on outside and I'll show you," as he headed for the door. Led the way out into the deserted little street in that ugly little neighborhood, out to where the sidewalk should have been. Stopped there in the midst of that grimy, depressing scene where his first thought, his only thought, was to try to keep this thing going somehow. "By the way, my name's Gabe."

"I'm Gary," the big guy responded after a slight hesitation, followed by an expectant, "So uh..."

"So... You ship out?" Gabe didn't want to hear the guy's implied question. Not yet anyway. Not when answering it could mean the loss of this golden opportunity, the untimely demise of this brief moment of companionship.

"Yeah, a course."

"So then what, uh...? Whatta you work on?"

"Oh, I go offshore," Gary told him matter-of-factly. "Deep-sea."

“Oh really?” Gabe was impressed all at once, even more impressed with the guy than what he had already been. Because if there is any such thing as an aristocracy among seamen, it’s the deep-sea guys. The ones who work on the big ships, sailing all over the world in the way that Gabe hoped to do someday if he succeeded with his plan to upgrade his license. To make himself into one of those guys at the complete opposite end of the spectrum from the push-boaters who normally inhabited that hotel.

But while Gabe may have been impressed, Gary was obviously more interested in food right then than he was in conversation. “So you were sayin’ about that place to eat?”

At which Gabe knew that he would have to take the hint at last. Have to come up with an answer and put a premature end to this first bright spot which had appeared in his life in so long a time. Have to... Or wait a minute. Maybe he could draw this thing out if he were to bend the truth a bit. Tell the guy one tiny lie... “Hey, I tell you what, I gotta get somethin’ to eat myself. So I’ll show you this place, okay? Best one around here, though that’s not sayin’ much.”

And with that, they were on their way. Off to the best greasy-spoon in the area, or actually the only greasy-spoon since all the other places within walking distance of the hotel were fast-food joints. Low-down and dirty fast-food joints. It wasn’t long before the two of them were sitting down in a booth together, Gabe ordering a light meal since he had already eaten, and Gary studying the menu for some time before ordering the cheapest thing available. The cheapest large meal. And then as they sat after that and waited for the food to arrive, they began to talk in the way that all good seamen do when first getting to know each other. They began to tell a few of their favorite sea-stories.

Gabe told about some of his most interesting experiences on the Lakes, though as for Gary, he seemed to talk on a whole other level. Telling about his adventures aboard freighters in all sorts of far-away places, the sorts of places that Gabe had often dreamed of visiting someday. And while he knew in his heart that he should have been feeling envy toward this guy as he threw out all those exotic names so casually, somehow Gabe felt nothing of the sort. Because how could he feel something like that toward a guy who was telling those stories in such a simple and unassuming way? With no brag and no air of superiority, but instead he was simply stating the facts of life. And perhaps it was for that reason that while Gabe may have felt a growing sense of, This is the life that I should have been living all these years and I should be the one telling those stories, he at the same time felt no ill-will toward the guy whatsoever. No competitiveness and no jealousy. Nothing but a quietly growing affection. A feeling that the more he got to know about Gary, the more he liked him.

And he still liked him even when the guy appeared to get a bit dodgy on certain questions, whether intentionally or not. Answering a simple little question like, “Where are you from?” with a sea-story about the first ship he ever worked on years before, and in the process making no reference to any city or state or even a region of the country other than the casual mention of a few of the ports which the ship happened to visit. And Gary didn’t do much better when Gabe asked him another seemingly straightforward question a short time later, a question about how exactly he had gotten there that evening and where he had come from. Because the only answer that Gabe got was a joke about having taken a long walk. A joke that told him nothing about what he wanted to know.

There was no evasion when Gabe got around to asking about the future, however, Gary opening right up and telling all about his plans to go down and register at the union hall the next morning and then hopefully get a ship soon. Very soon. And with the way he said it, the way he put so much emphasis on his need for speed in acquiring a job, Gabe found himself starting to wonder about the guy's financial situation. Asking how things could have gotten so bad that someone like him had ended up in a place like that, slumming it in an old hotel like the one where he presently was. When he tried to bring it up, though, tried to probe his new acquaintance gently about his economic predicament, the guy seemed to close back down on him, giving nothing in return but jokes and evasions. Nothing in the way of satisfactory answers. The closest thing to a reply being the moment when Gary suddenly came out with a question of his own. "Hey, do you know how long it takes to transfer a bank account here? A savings account from outa state?"

"I don't know, but I'd have to guess that it'd take at least a week or maybe even two. Cause you know how the mail is."

And no sooner had Gary heard those words, that week or two, than he seemed to deflate before Gabe's eyes. Staring off into space with a worried look on his face before snapping back out of it a short time later and asking, "So how's things on them supply-boats?"

"Oh those? It's not easy. Not so far," Gabe began. And then as he went on after that to tell a few of the details of his struggle to find a job, he saw that worried look return to Gary's face once again. Return and hang there this time.

So obviously there was something wrong, something which Gary refused to confide in his dinner companion. Displaying a lack of confidence which Gabe found to be rather disappointing. Though it wasn't until he tried to steer the conversation onto political issues and current events that he was to receive his first true disillusionment of the evening. Because what he found when he brought up those subjects was that Gary had only one thing to say on the topic: "I ain't into politics." A phrase which he repeated so many times that finally Gabe was forced to give up. Left wondering what was going on with the guy and who he was exactly. Asking, was he really as ignorant as he appeared to be, or was it all an act? And was it selective amnesia which he displayed when dealing with his shore-side past, or was it something else? And most of all, Gabe wanted to know if it would be worth his while to spend the next few days hanging out with a guy like that. Until he got himself a job. Whether he wouldn't be better off by himself, cut off from Gary and all the rest of that human race which he somehow represented. Because which was better? Accompanied or alone? All alone. And miserable.

Later, when they were on their way back to the hotel, Gary asked him all at once, "Hey, ya wanta get high?"

"Sure," said Gabe who in reality didn't much care one way or the other since he only smoked pot socially, though soon he was following along in the dark as his companion searched out a good, quiet spot in a vacant lot, hidden behind piles of junk. And then once Gary had lit up a joint and passed it over, once Gabe had taken his first toke, he spoke again. "Good stuff," he said more out of etiquette than conviction.

“It better be, cause it cost me forty bucks,” was Gary’s quiet, no-shit reply.

“Forty bucks? For one joint?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Wow, that’s... How’d it cost you so much?”

Gabe’s question went unanswered, though. Whether because Gary chose to ignore it or because he was simply distracted, looking off into the distance and saying, “Forty bucks,” in an almost meditative tone. “Forty bucks,” he repeated as Gabe handed the joint back to him. And then again as he held the thing up in front of him and looked at it, “Forty bucks.”

FAT TIMES

The next day’s job search proved to be no more fruitful for Gabe than had the previous three. Walking and riding buses from office to office in the blazing sun, the humidity so oppressive that he would be drenched in sweat before he had gone half a block. And along with the physical discomfort which he had to endure, he also felt a growing sense of unease, a nagging suspicion that he would never find a job even as he worked his way ever further down the food-chain of the offshore oil industry. Because by now he had been to all the top players in the field only to be rejected at each and every one of them, and his reception was proving to be no better as he made the rounds of the smaller companies. None of them liked the fact that he had no experience aboard offshore vessels or even sailing as Mate, all his sea-time having been as AB and Ordinary on the Lakes. And none of them seemed to know what to make of his license when he showed it to them either, giving a quizzical look when they came to the phrase “upon the Great Lakes...” While in one company he visited, the personnel manager even came right out and asked him, “You know this isn’t the Great Lakes, don’t you?”

Oh, how insulting it was to be asked a stupid question like that by some guy who had half the intellectual fire-power that Gabe had—a tenth the fire-power—but a guy who had such control over his destiny at that moment thanks to the screwed-up capitalist system under which they were forced to live. And especially so in that anti-union region of the country where he had no choice but to go out begging for jobs from those assholes. Those empty suits, or in some cases those empty bolo ties and cowboy hats, but those guys who held so much power over him right then. The power to decide whether he worked or not. What a comedown it was from the union hiring-hall system to which he had become accustomed up on the Lakes. That system in which all he had to do was to play by the rules and take the jobs that he could get, take them or reject them and wait for something better to come along. But with this system, this lack of a system. Oh, it was horrible! The way he had to go around kissing those guys’ asses and begging them for... For what? For a job on one of those broken-down little pieces of garbage that they called ships? One of those low-paying scab-ships!

How Gabe hated it. And he didn’t know if it would have been possible to feel any more degraded and depressed than he did when he returned to that cheap little hotel at the end of the day. He felt positively violated, his entire sense of self-worth, his human dignity. And what he

wanted to do more than anything else was to run away, to give up his plan and go back home. The only thing stopping him from packing up and getting out right then and there the knowledge that since it was Friday, he would be able to take a break over the next couple of days. He wouldn't have to go out and humiliate himself any further until Monday morning. Though as he thought ahead to the next two days, those days which he would be spending all alone in that hotel, locked up inside his room with nothing but his books for company and nothing but the occasional breeze coming through the window to fight the burning heat, he felt an awful sense of dread gnawing away at him. The fear of two days of boredom and loneliness and depression. Two days during which he would have no one to talk to but those push-boaters and those... God! He sure wanted to see Gary again.

Though how could he go up and knock on the door of someone he barely knew? Even if he had known which room the guy was in. He couldn't, of course. And that meant that his only option was to hang around the lobby and hope that Gary would come through there sooner or later. To sit in one of those worn-out chairs and watch the news and whatever else came after it. All that junk programming and all that... Or then again, maybe he could go out for a walk, go wander around the neighborhood as the light faded and night came on. Go eat a burger and get himself a little exercise, even if he really didn't need it.

And it wasn't until after he had been down the street and back, down and back, as he was approaching the hotel for the fourth or fifth time, that Gabe finally came across the object of his search. He found Gary just stepping out the door with some other guy in tow. Some dirty, scummy-looking guy who gave off bad vibes even from a distance. Even in the dim twilight.

"Hey Gabe! How's it goin'?" Gary called out as though to a long-lost friend. "Just the guy I was lookin' for."

"Hey, how are ya?" Gabe was sure that his sudden elation must have shown through in his voice. Because how could he hide it? How could he contain himself when all at once, he saw his salvation appear before his eyes? His deliverance from loneliness.

"You're just in time, brother. Just perfect. Cause we're on our way out right now. We're goin' out to celebrate!" The enthusiasm, the joy in Gary's voice was nearly infectious.

"Celebrate? What're you gonna celebrate?"

"Oh, we're gonna..."

"It's fuckin' Friday, ain't it?" the guy beside Gary said in a rough tone. And as Gabe drew close enough to see the guy better in the fading light, he wasn't a bit impressed by the sight. The first piece of southern white trash that he had ever seen so close up. Greasy black hair and scraggly whiskers and missing teeth. Tattoos and a grubby t-shirt.

"Oh hey, this here's Gabe," Gary spoke up after laughing mildly at the joke, "and this here's..."

Gabe failed to catch the guy's name, failed to try. And then as the two of them nodded slightly at each other, Gary went on. "So come on you guys, let's go get ourselves a drink. Or maybe ten."

"Twenty!" the other guy said. That guy... What was his name? Pete or something like that?

As the three of them made their way toward the nearest of the run-down little neighborhood bars, Gabe found that his elation was quickly being replaced by doubts. Questions about what exactly he was getting himself into and questions about who this Pete character could be and where Gary had met him. Because he couldn't understand how a guy like Gary would want to hang around with someone like that. Someone who was so obviously his inferior in every way possible. I mean, just look at the two of them! Gary with his magnificent build and his striking blue eyes and his radiant smile, while Pete was... He was so far behind the times that he carried his cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of his t-shirt like it was still the fifties or something. But not only was Gary hanging out with the guy, he was actually treating him like an equal. Gabe could hear it in his voice and see it in his body-language, that Gary didn't see himself as being any better than that... that scum, there was no other word for it.

And if anything, Gabe's doubts grew stronger still when the three of them entered the bar a block or two later. Because what was with that place, anyway? That grungy little bar whose interior turned out to be just as bad as its exterior. Or even worse since at least from the outside he hadn't been able to smell the place. The awful stink of stale beer that filled the air, beer mixed with who knew what else. Mixed with he didn't want to know what else.

The lights in the place were dim. Thankfully. And what passed for tables and chairs and barstools were heavily worn and half-broken. There was a beat up old jukebox near the front door and a pool table in back, and when it came to signs and other decorations, they consisted almost entirely of beer company giveaways, those and a few stupid jokes posted on the walls such as the old Helen Waite sign. "Our credit manager is Helen Waite. If you want credit, go the Helen Waite." Thanks to an undersized air-conditioning unit, it was slightly cooler inside than it had been out in the street, and lined up along the bar, giving the place its final skid-row touch, were a half-dozen losers. The same types to be seen at Miss Flossy's hotel. While working behind the bar was a fat, unattractive woman.

"Hi there, ma'am. How's it goin'?" Gary said as the three of them took their places at the bar, as open and friendly as could be. "We wanta get a round-a Buds," he went on. And then pointing toward the far end of the bar, in the direction of an especially inebriated-looking push-boat-type, he added, "And get that guy a cup-a coffee."

The fat lady laughed at the joke. You could see that she was completely taken with the big guy, as any woman in her right mind would be. And she was all smiles when she came back with the beers. "So you fellas from around here?"

"Yeah," Pete grunted quickly.

After which Gary replied in his far more friendly and out-going way, motioning toward Gabe with his thumb as he said, "Not us. We're stayin' at the hotel over there."

“Miss Flossy’s?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Gabe smiled weakly as she looked his way. And while he knew that he should say something right then, he had no idea what. Other than, “Hi,” that is.

The next thing he knew, Gary was speaking up once again. “I got this round,” he said as he dug into his pocket and came up with a couple of bills which he handed to the lady. Pete making no visible gesture in reply other than to take a gulp of his beer, while as for Gabe, he mumbled out a weak, “Thanks.”

Gary went on for some time after that, talking with the fat lady. Practically flirting with her, much to Gabe’s surprise. Already aware of the fact that there were many facets to Gary’s character, everything from the quiet aggressiveness of his dealings with that little wino whose room he had wanted to his shyness when approaching to ask about a place to eat, while now he seemed to be witnessing an entirely new one. Or at least a far more intense version of the friendly guy with whom he had eaten supper the night before. Now he was seeing the nicest guy in the world. A guy who was charming and gracious to all, even to the fat lady and Pete and the other losers in that bar. Treating them all with such respect. As though he had no idea just how far below him they stood on the scale of human evolution. As though he had absolutely no sense of hierarchy.

And even more than that, what Gabe was seeing right then was a man who was truly in the mood to party. A man without a care in the world. The guy’s bouts of quiet pensiveness of the evening before, his worries about money or whatever else it may have been, gone all at once, it appeared. Leaving Gary as happy and carefree as could be. So happy that it was almost like some weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. And as Gabe thought about the guy’s mood-swings of the night before, those clear signs of problems which he had displayed, he wondered how it was that tonight the guy could suddenly have money to burn. Buying the first round of beers and the second as well, this in spite of Gabe’s attempt to pay. So that while Gary wasn’t exactly flashing money around, pulling the bills from his pocket one at a time, still it was clear that he had quite a bit of it. More than enough to play the big spender in that cheap little bar.

With his curiosity aroused as it was, Gabe waited for a good moment to inquire about the subject. A moment when the fat lady was off taking care of another customer and Pete seemed to be spacing out, so that he could turn and ask in an offhanded way, “So did you get yourself a ship today?” Thinking about the only obvious explanation for why a seaman would suddenly be burning through what he assumed to be a rather thin bankroll.

“A ship? Nah,” Gary answered casually.

“So you just...”

“Nah, there ain’t nothin’ goin’ on around here these days, man,” Gary went on just as unconcernedly, with none of the doom-and-gloom which had been in his voice the day before, but instead he was simply stating the facts. “There’s lotsa guys and damn few ships.”

“So you’re gonna...?” Gabe didn’t know what more to ask. He didn’t know how to probe into a financial mystery involving someone he had only so recently met. Didn’t know...

Until suddenly his chance was gone as Gary changed the subject. “Hey, ya wanta play some pool?”

“Me...?”

“I’ll play ya,” Pete piped up before Gabe could say more.

And with that the two men were getting up from their stools, Gary pulling a couple of quarters from his pocket and placing them on the bar in front of Gabe. Saying, “Why don’t ya go put some music on the jukebox, okay?” as he started to leave.

Me...? Gabe was about to say once again. Because he had never been much into music. It had never been more than background noise as far as he was concerned, so that he was the last person in the world to be picking out songs. Though having been asked in the way that he had, by a friend who didn’t have time to do it for himself, he knew that there was no choice but to go ahead and do the best he could. Go over and push a few buttons.

When he arrived at the jukebox, though, Gabe found that his dilemma was even more serious than what he had anticipated since everything he saw there was country music. Nothing but country on the entire list. Because while he didn’t know very much about rock, he knew absolutely nothing about country music, so little that he had never even heard of more than three or four of the names listed. Johnny Cash and a couple of others. So then what could he do? Should he try picking out names at random and hope for the best? Or should he play those three or four? Or should he...? Oh, what the hell. It was only for a bunch of losers to listen to, so it looked like it was going to be an evening of Johnny Cash.

Returning to the bar to retrieve the beer he had left there, Gabe saw that a new customer had taken a seat just down from his own. A short, roly-poly guy who immediately accosted him in the most cheerful and outgoing tone imaginable. “Hi there, I’m...”

Gabe missed the guy’s name, as usual. Because who cared about a loser like that? And then as he mumbled his own name in reply while reaching for the beer in an attempt to make a quick grab-and-run, he soon found that his escape wasn’t going to come nearly so easily. Not if he didn’t want to be a complete jerk about it, that is. Because no sooner had he finished speaking his name than Roly-Poly came back with a, “Hi there, Gabe. Glad to meet ya,” followed immediately by a joke. “Did ya ever hear the one about the Swedish World War One ace?”

Gabe said nothing as he looked away, hoping to discourage the guy from continuing. But Roly-Poly seemed oblivious to the coldness of the reception as he launched right into his story, speaking in the most godawful excuse for a Swedish accent and doing so with such relish as to indicate that he was truly proud of his talent. He told about the flyer describing his adventures to a group of high-class ladies, telling them how he shot down this Fokker and that Fokker and the other Fokker, until finally his friend interrupts to explain to the ladies that Fokkers are the type of airplane which the Germans were flying. To which the Swede replies, No, I mean them fokkers was flyin’ Messerschmidts.

Gabe smiled weakly at the end of the joke, too polite to ignore the guy completely though still worried about encouraging him to tell another. Hoping that the guy would take the hint and let him go in peace. Though apparently when it came to hints of that sort, Roly-Poly was totally deaf, because the next thing Gabe knew, he was starting in on another joke. Another and then another, the jokes coming one after the other in a steady stream, some of them straight-out jokes while others were ethnic jokes told in bad accents. And the one thing that all the guy's jokes had in common was the fact that they were horrible, each and every one of them. Corny jokes that put Gabe's patience to a severe test.

Because he wanted to get out of there, wanted to get away from that guy and rejoin his friend, though he could see that it wasn't going to be so easy. Not when the slightest movement on his part to turn and walk away would only increase the urgency with which Roly-Poly spoke, grabbing Gabe by the arm and raising the volume of his voice and decreasing the already short intervals between jokes. And going on and on and on while Gabe practically writhed in discomfort. Though what else could he do when the guy was being so insistent? So grasping in his pursuit of an audience. So positively needy.

But then again, what about Gabe's feelings? His overwhelming desire to flee. Because wasn't it already bad enough just being stuck in that lowdown dive? Breathing that fetid air and suffering the indignity of being seen as a customer of a joint like that. Did he also have to put up with those terrible jokes being told by that loser? It was almost beyond human endurance, and his nerves were fast approaching the breaking point. They were stretching and stretching until finally they snapped at the telling of a joke that involved not one but two equally horrible accents. Jewish mother and Italian mother.

Roly-Poly's unfunny tale of the Italian mother bragging to the other about her son having become a priest only to find that her friend is completely unimpressed. And the Jewish mother remains unimpressed even as the Italian mother ups the ante and ups it again, talking about her son becoming a bishop someday or a cardinal or maybe even the pope. And the Italian mother's frustration is so great when she finds that her friend is unmoved by the idea of her son becoming pope that she finally blurts out, What do you want him to be, Jesus Christ? To which the Jewish mother responds, Well one of our boys made it.

That joke was the last straw! Gabe said to himself. He couldn't take it anymore, and he no longer cared if he hurt the guy's feelings or not, because he had to get out of there, and he had to get out now. So quickly draining what was left of his beer, he held up the empty bottle. "Hey, I gotta go see my friends," he said, cutting Roly-Poly off in mid-sentence as he recited the opening lines of yet another joke. Cutting him off and walking away. Shaking his arm and slipping it from the guy's grasp and ignoring the rising volume of the voice behind him as he went. Making not the least gesture of recognition or farewell, not even a nod, a slight turning of the head.

Because what did that guy want, anyway? What was his problem? Why couldn't he just be normal? Why did he have to be such a pain-in-the-ass?

Gabe felt a wave of relief as he left Roly-Poly behind. A sense of liberation which soon turned to joy as he drew near his friend Gary, that big guy whose presence practically glowed

through the dinge of the bar. Shining above the shabby pool table upon which he was playing. And if anything, he lit the place up even more brightly when his face broke out into a big smile as he saw Gabe make his approach.

“Hey, there ya are. I thought ya went and got lost or somethin’,” he burst out.

“Yeah, I damn near did,” Gabe muttered back.

“Oh yeah?” Gary chuckled slightly before speaking again. “Ya know, that’s some mighty good music ya picked out there, brother.”

“Yeah...?” Good music? What the hell was he talking about? It was country! Gabe didn’t want to argue with the guy, though. Not with the only person in that place who was worth a damn. The only person in the entire neighborhood. And so instead of saying more, he changed the subject. “Hey, are you guys ready for another round? This one’s on me.”

“Oh no, it’s not. We’re playin’ for the next round,” Gary came back quickly. “So if ya wanta buy one, ya gotta get into the game,” he went on as he lined up a shot.

“Yeah, and ya gotta lose,” Pete added.

“That’s right, ya gotta lose. Ya gotta... Oh shit!” Gary interrupted himself as he watched the outcome of the distracted shot which he had just taken. Watched the eight-ball roll into the side pocket. And then with a slight shrug, he added, “Well, I guess this one’s on me, huh?”

As Gary walked off toward the bar, Pete spoke up in a mildly threatening tone, “Ya gonna play?”

“Yeah sure,” Gabe replied calmly, having been around long enough to know how to deal with a tone like that. To know that the last thing he should do was to let the guy intimidate him, and so he was cool as could be as he pulled a quarter from his pocket and jammed it into the slot and started racking up the balls.

Pete addressed him once again as he did so, speaking in that same tough-guy way. “So whatta ya think? Ya wanta make a bet on it?”

“Sure,” said Gabe without hesitation. You can’t bluff me that easily. “So whatta ya say? Another round of beers?”

“Nah, I mean money. Like say... How bout two bucks?”

“Two bucks? Sure.” Because what’s two bucks, anyway? It’s not like the guy said fifty or a hundred. It was only two bucks. He could easily afford to lose that much. And so there was no trepidation in Gabe’s voice as he said, “Okay, go ahead and break,” before walking over to pick out a cue.

Pete played fairly well, sinking a couple of balls before missing. And as he watched the guy, Gabe knew that he could hold out little hope of retaining his two dollars. Not when he had

played so little pool over the years, almost always losing in the few games he had played. And as he took a good look at the shot which Pete had left him, a bank-shot of a sort that he had never come close to making in his life, he was sure that his turn was going to be a short one. Because how could he possibly make a shot like that? It was a waste of time even to try, though try he must, of course. He had to line it up and take the shot and... Wow! Can you believe that? The ball actually went in!

Evidently Pete couldn't believe it either. "Shit man! I may as well give ya them two bucks right now."

Gabe said nothing, though. He wanted to keep his poker face on, acting as though he had known all along that he was going to make the shot. And he showed no emotion as he calmly lined up the next shot. Another tough shot, though one that somehow went in.

"Oh fuck!" said Pete as Gary returned with the beers. "Ya didn't tell me this guy was a fuckin' pool-shark."

Gabe took it as a compliment, as evidently it had been intended. And though he was only vaguely aware of it at the time, he was suddenly starting to feel better about himself than he had in a long time. Better about the decisions he had made and the life he was living, or at least better about most aspects of that life. Not all. Because there was nothing that could ever make him feel better about that little bar where he presently was, the "Shamrock" or whatever it was called. That place was still a dive no matter how good he may have felt about himself right then. It was still a dive and its patrons were still a bunch of losers.

Gabe made his next couple of shots before missing one, and then the next time his turn came up, he finished running the table on Pete. Finished collecting the two bucks as well. Gary was his next opponent, playing with nothing riding on the game, though even without that extra incentive, still Gabe made short work of his friend, bringing up another game against Pete.

"Ya gonna gimme a chance to win my money back?" he asked as he racked up the balls, his voice less threatening now than it had been before. Almost pleading.

"Yeah, of course." Gabe wasn't sure if the guy was on the level with him or not. He didn't know if Pete might be trying to set something up for later. Though whatever the case may have been, he knew that he had nothing to lose for the time being. Nothing but the two bucks which he had just won.

And as he handily beat the guy a second time, Gabe began to draw the conclusion that there was no hustle involved. Not from Pete, that unsophisticated slob. Because it was pretty obvious from the way he was playing that he was trying as hard as he could, but that his best just wasn't good enough. Not with the way that Gabe was playing right then. And if there was any mystery to be solved that night, it was the question of why Gabe was suddenly playing so far above his head, making shots that he had never dreamed of making before. And he wasn't using his intellect to make them, either. He wasn't thinking the shots through in the way that he had always tried to do in the past, measuring the angles and calculating them in his head. But instead he was playing purely on gut-instinct tonight, lining up the shots until they felt right in his guts and then taking them. And he was making them, too, as hard as it was to believe.

The next game ended with Gary buying yet another round of beers, after which Gabe found himself faced with the prospect of playing a brand new arrival on the scene. A young black guy who had recently entered the bar and who carried himself with a lot of confidence, acting like a guy who knew his way around a pool table. Though while that act of his may have been intimidating to some, it made no impression upon Gabe. Not when he was getting to be just drunk enough to ignore a little show like that. Drunk enough to let nothing come between him and his fast-growing self-belief. His vision of himself as the best player in town. Bar none.

“What ya playin’ for?” the young guy asked as he finished racking up the balls.

“You name it,” Gabe said in an icy voice.

“A nickel?”

“Sure.” No hesitation at all. Nothing but cold, hard determination as the challenge of the increasing dollar amount drew his concentration more intensely into that place in his gut.

And the young guy was good, Gabe had to admit that fact, though unfortunately for him, he wasn’t quite good enough. He wasn’t capable of beating the mighty Gabe. And neither was his friend, the young white guy who had come in with him and who lost the next game for another five dollars.

After that the victims continued to pile up, Pete for five dollars this time around and then Gary for free, after which the black guy dropped another five as did his friend, Gabe running the table on him completely in their rematch, not giving him a single shot. Next came yet another new arrival on the scene, an older guy who stammered and hesitated before agreeing to bet a dollar, and then finally it was back to Pete. Though as he racked up the balls this time, Pete said that he didn’t want to lose any more money. He said he wanted to play this game for nothing but fun. And wouldn’t you know it that with the pressure off all at once, with no money riding on the game, Gabe messed up for the first time all night. He took a bad shot and sank the eight-ball.

“Well shit, will ya look at that! First time I win and there ain’t no money on it.”

First time Gabe had lost, Pete should have said, since he was well on his way to another defeat until that last shot came along. And as Gabe stood watching in disbelief, it took a moment for the idea to sink in that he wouldn’t be playing in the next game. That he would have to take a break while other people played, waiting in line with the other losers for a chance to challenge the winner. And meanwhile, he would have to... What should he do?

He thought about going to the bar to get a round of beers, or at least one for himself and one for Gary. He wasn’t so sure about Pete who had never made any effort to pay. But then as he recalled the bad experience of his last visit to the bar, he looked over to see if Roly-Poly was still there. Looked only to find that the guy’s fat, smiling face was still in the same spot as before, though at the same time he saw that there was someone else sitting beside him now. Some new victim trapped in the desperate loneliness of the guy’s jokes, some new sucker to absorb his attention, so that for Gabe the coast was clear. He could return to the bar with no danger of falling back into Roly-Poly’s clutches.

And then no sooner had Gabe gotten the beers and paid for them than he was on his way back to the pool table, back to the site of his new-found glory. That little pool-shooting world in which he had so calmly and quietly yet so clearly proven his mastery. Proven that he was the boss. The king. And it wasn't just the alcohol that was speaking for him here. No, he was sure that he could see it in the eyes of the other players when they looked at him. See the way they bowed down to him and silently proclaimed him king. A drunken monarch though he may have been, one who by then had gone well beyond his usual cut-off point in the consumption of alcohol. But what did a little inebriation matter to a king? The king of that faded old pool table. The king of that dirty little bar. The king of... He was the King of Hell! That's what he was. Because if ever there was a Hell-on-Earth, surely it was that bar. That broken-down little dive full of broken-down bums. That place was Hell if any such place existed.

As he made his way over to Gary to hand him his new beer, though, he was surprised by what he saw in his friend's face, that look which was so much at odds with his own dark thoughts. Because what he saw there was a look of happiness and contentment, the big guy smiling at one and all, even exchanging pleasantries with those who passed his way as though he were in the most wonderful place in the world. As though there were nothing wrong with being stuck in that nest of rejects, surrounded by that lowest of all forms of humanity. What he saw in Gary's face was joy. And he could hardly believe the words he heard when the big guy took his beer and raised it in a sort of toast. "Fat times, huh?" he said, grinning from ear to ear.

Fat times? What was he talking about? What was so fat about that dump where they were other than the lady working behind the bar? What was...?

Gabe's reverie was soon interrupted by the call that his quarter was up next. And as he got ready to rack the balls, he saw that his opponent was going to be the black guy once again. The current reigning champion, and a guy who fixed him with his toughest stare as he said, "What ya say we play for twenty this time?"

"Sure. No problem." The number didn't matter to Gabe when he knew that there was no way he could lose. The King of Hell returning to do battle for his throne, and there was no way that a guy like that was going to stand in his way. Not when Gabe's concentration was zeroing in so unerringly upon that place in his gut, that seat of all the instincts which had made him king.

And the black guy played a very good game this time around. He played better than he had before, though unfortunately for him it still wasn't good enough, his one miss giving Gabe all the opening he needed to put the guy away. Because it turned out that Gabe played even better for twenty dollars than he had for two or five. Though it wasn't that the money itself meant anything to him. No, the money was just a number as far as he was concerned, its only significance the size of the challenge to his reign which it represented, with that twenty dollars being a loud and clear statement of the guy's intention to seize his throne. And it was for that reason that Gabe had felt such an urgent need to put the young upstart back in his place. To show him that there was only room for one king in that beer-swilling Hell of theirs.

It wasn't that Gabe was completely infallible, though. No, he lost a game every once in a while. But the thing about his losses was that they always seemed to come when the pressure was off, when there was little or no money riding on the game. Little or no challenge to his title.

While at those times when it truly counted, his dominance was so complete that soon the better players began to drift away, off to greener pastures where they stood some chance of winning a game or two. Winning a little money for themselves rather than constantly paying out to Gabe.

And it was a good thing for him that the more talented players left when they did since Gabe continued to drink long after he should have stopped. Long after he had passed the point where the alcohol helped his game, filtering out the distractions and helping him to focus in upon his guts. He continued to imbibe even as the negative effects of the alcohol came steadily to the fore, their impairment of his coordination slowly but surely canceling out his increased concentration. Not that it made any difference in the results, though, since by the time he had reached that point, there was no one left to play against him but a bunch of chumps. Pete and the young black guy having long since gone as had everyone else capable of offering him a challenge, so that with no one around to vie for his title, he reigned supreme all evening long as the undisputed King of that putrid little Hell.

That was what Gabe thought was happening, anyway. Though in truth, most of the latter part of the evening passed him by in an alcoholic blur. And it wasn't until he and Gary were out in the fresh air and on their way back to the hotel that he was able to form his last clear memories of the evening's events. When the two of them stopped off in the same spot they had visited the day before in order to partake of another dose of the devil's weed, and when after taking a couple of tokes, his intellect began to clear up ever so slightly, or at least to fog up in a different direction. One that made the storage of new memories possible.

"Did this stuff cost you another forty bucks?" he remembered asking at one point.

"Nah, I got it from Sonny. Regular price."

"Sonny...?"

"Yeah, you know... Sonny," Gary insisted mildly.

"Oh, Sonny..." He must be talking about Pete.

Gabe took another toke, and then as he was passing the joint back, suddenly a thought came to mind and went directly to his uninhibited lips. The question which had been on his mind earlier in the evening. "Ya know, with the way you were actin' last night, I thought you were broke. But now here you are buyin' dope and buyin' rounds and..."

"Yeah, I *was* broke. Damn near."

"You were?" Gabe paused for a moment, waiting for his friend to go on and explain. But then when Gary said nothing more, shutting down as though he had spoken too quickly, Gabe found that he had to prod. "So what happened? Where'd you get the money? You didn't get a ship..."

Gary resisted while Gabe insisted, pushing for an explanation without the least inhibition, the alcohol speaking for him as he repeated his question again and then again. Repeated it until

finally Gary broke down. “I tell ya what. I know I can trust ya, so like... I tell ya, man. I found it is what.”

“You found it? You found...?”

“Yeah, I found the money. Cause like I found this stash in my room, and it was like... It was hidden in there, man.”

“A stash? Hidden there?” In that cheap little hotel? Who would stash money in a place like that? Who but that...? “You mean that guy left a stash behind?”

“No, it wasn’t him!” Gary shot back quickly as though he took offense at the accusation. Taking the man’s room and then stealing his money. And his voice was sure and steady as he went on. “No man, it was an old stash. Ya could see it was. Cause it was like... It was there for a long time, brother. It was like... It wasn’t that guy who left it!”

“No...? And you just found it in there?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Cause like it was hidden real good. And like it been there a long time, too, cause there was all this dust and shit on it, and it was just... I don’t know why I even looked in there, ya know, but it was like there was somethin’ tellin’ me I should pry this board out and look behind it and like... Man, there it was!”

There the money was, as he went on the explain. A wad of cash big enough to pay for a weekend of partying—at the cheap little bars of that neighborhood, in any case—and big enough to remove whatever pressing financial worries he might have had the day before. Because while he never said just how much money he had found, it was clearly enough to pay for the so-called fat times which he was presently enjoying.

As Gabe listened, he wasn’t quite sure how to take the information he was being given, whether to take the guy at his word about the money being from an old stash which had been left there by some long-forgotten resident of the room or whether to question his friend’s honesty. Though as he did his best to scrutinize Gary’s face in the near-total darkness, he could find nothing there to raise his suspicions. No signs of deception in the voice or posture. Nothing but sincerity, everything about the guy a reflection of purity and honesty. Of a man too straightforward to lie.

Or at least to lie to anyone but himself. Because lying was precisely what he must have been doing in the final words to come out of his mouth that evening. The last words which Gabe was able to recall later. When during the final leg of their journey back to the hotel, Gary spoke up all at once to say something to the effect of, “That sure was a good bunch-a people back there, wasn’t it? Specially for a place that’s kinda... You know, kinda cheap.”

Good people? That bunch of losers!? Gabe could hardly believe what he was hearing, and he had no idea how to respond, even through his liquor-loosened lips. Because the very idea! It was almost unthinkable. To hear the guy say that rather than simply having taken some strange, sick pleasure in the evening’s events such as Gabe had, having enjoyed the hours which he had spent as the King of Hell, Gary had actually liked the people he met there. That he had enjoyed

the company he had found in Hell. The whole concept was so far beyond the pale as to leave him speechless.

The next day didn't start out very well for Gabe thanks to the hangover and the heat. He had a rough time in the morning, sweating away in bed for hours while trying to sleep it off, and it wasn't until late in the afternoon that he finally began to feel better. Just in time to go out and meet Gary for a meal together followed by another night of carousing at the local bars. Another night of fat times. Though as they finished their meal and headed out for their first drink, they decided to skip the Shamrock on this occasion, visiting instead one or all of the other bars in the neighborhood.

Those bars which turned out to be nearly identical to the Shamrock in every detail, the same place though with slightly different layouts. All of them were in as big a state of disrepair inside and out, as dirty and disreputable looking, and all of them had the same stink to one extent or another. And on top of that they seemed to share the same clientele, the same group of lowlifes evidently patronizing all the bars. Because Gabe thought he recognized a few faces from the night before, only for his suspicions to be confirmed when Gary addressed some of them by name. At the same time, though, he actually noticed a few females among the patrons on this evening, something that he couldn't remember having seen before. All of them were obviously from the very lowest social classes, however. Rough-edged and hardened and completely unappealing. Rode hard and put away wet as he heard a local cowboy describe one of them.

Not that Gabe cared, of course, since his only interest in being in that sordid little world lay in the opportunity it presented for him to resume his reign over the pool table, and perhaps to extend that reign until it came to encompass the entire neighborhood. And so it was with that purpose in mind that he went straight to the back of the first place they entered and deposited a quarter on the table, challenging the winner. But then as he stood waiting for his turn, glancing about the room through sober eyes now, he seemed to see things in a whole different light from what he had the night before. A much less melodramatic light. Because while the place he saw about him was obviously rundown and depressing, it hardly looked like Hell-on-Earth anymore. No, it looked more like... Like what? Like something milder. Like the Purgatory that Catholics talk about perhaps? A place far below Heaven but not so far as Hell.

And being sober didn't help Gabe's pool game either, as he played a terrible round the first time up, missing shots that he would have made easily the night before. Missing shots that any beginner should have been able to make. And as he was forced to put up a second quarter and wait for another turn, he began to ask himself what was wrong. Why weren't his guts working for him tonight? What did he have to do to get his mind back into that place?

Gabe lost his second game as well, took a break from play after that while he finished off his first beer and then chugged down a second, hoping to recover some of the drunken concentration of the night before. Though even as he was working on his third beer, as he got up to try again at the pool table, still it seemed like the harder he pushed himself, the worse he did. Like the more effort he made to force his mind into that place, the further it wandered away, into doubts and second-thoughts. So that it was only from time to time that he ever managed to focus in and make his shots.

So what was wrong? he wondered. Why couldn't he get his head back to where it should be? And he tried everything he could think of, only to find that nothing helped. Not even a change of scenery after he and Gary walked down the lightless, near-lifeless street to another bar. Another place in which his pool playing fizzled as he still failed to find that sweet-spot.

There was one thing that he did find in that new place, however: Roly-Poly. Because he saw the guy sitting at the bar when the two of them walked in, a smile on his face as he looked about for fresh victims. Not Gabe who knew enough by then not to go anywhere near the guy, though as for Gary, he made the mistake of walking right up to where Roly-Poly sat when he went to order the beers. Right within range for Roly-Poly to pounce. To begin telling one of his stupid jokes even as Gary looked away to signal the bartender and place the order, and the guy was still going strong when Gary received the beers and paid for them, working on his third or fourth joke by then.

Gabe stood watching, wondering how his friend would ever be able to extricate himself and make his escape, when all at once he saw Gary start to laugh at one of the guy's punch-lines. Laugh convincingly if not enthusiastically. And then turning to leave after that as Roly-Poly started in on yet another joke, Gary cut him off as gently as could be. "Hey man, can ya save that one for later?" he asked in a kind, friendly tone. "I gotta go right now."

"Sure," said Roly-Poly with a satisfied look on his face. "I'll save ya more than one."

As Gabe saw that reaction, he could hardly believe his eyes, that desperate little man letting his friend go so easily, without the least struggle. That sick little... Or you know what? As he gave the guy a final glancing-over, a quick one since he didn't want to make eye-contact, Roly-Poly no longer looked as sick to him as he had the night before. Not at all pathological. But instead what Gabe saw at that moment was a pathetic little man. A lonely man in search of friendship. In search of someone to keep him company and care about him.

Because in fact, the place was filled with people who were exactly like that. Not the denizens of Hell that he had seen the night before, but rather it was filled with lonely people. Dead-end workingmen and a few women whose only chance at joy in life comes from a snoot-full of beer in a bottom-rung bar. Honky-tonk music playing on the jukebox while they sit surrounded by people every bit as lonely as themselves. Every bit as lost.

Oh, this was getting to be way too depressing! Gabe had to get out of there. And so after losing a couple of pool games, he went up to Gary. "Hey man, let's get goin'."

Off to a third bar. One that was just as bad as the first two, though one where at least he was able to get started on a whole new train of thought. And one where, to his surprise, he actually won the first game of pool that he played. The first game and the second one, too, at which point a few of those present seemed to recognize him all at once from the night before. They seemed to remember him as the man who had taken so much of their money. The King of Hell having made his return.

And there was one Cowboy Joe-type who even came right out and said it after Gabe's second victory. "Hey, ya better look out playin' that guy. He's some type-a New York City pool hustler."

Gabe's play took a definite turn for the better upon hearing that comment, his confidence making its return all at once. And he might have resumed his reign completely if not for a little incident which occurred a few games later and broke his concentration. An incident in which...

Oh, it was so frustrating! The way that Cowboy Joe interrupted one of his shots to tell him that he was breaking some stupid local rule. Some this-ain't-New-York-City rule. And then on the very next shot, the guy went and did the exact same thing. He brought up some other idiotic rule, and then he... Oh, it was so irritating! And Gabe got so mad at that jerk and all his buddies, called them so many names in his head, and... Well wouldn't you know it that right then he would go and knock the eight-ball in and they would all start laughing at him, saying that it had been a joke and that...

Oh, forget about it! Gabe didn't even want to think about it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: HUMOR AT HAPPY HOUR

I hope you won't mind one more interruption, but the joke which has just been played on the character in the book has brought to mind a similar joke in which I myself once played a small role. It was a joke that a group of us played on a yankee one day, and as coincidence would have it, the whole thing took place in one of the very bars in which this chapter is set, back in those very days.

Before I begin my description of the joke, however, I think that a few words are in order about the bars and the people who frequented them. Those bars which have been so egregiously misrepresented by the character in the book, portrayed by him as though they were some vision of Hell-on-Earth when in truth they were nothing of the sort. And I can tell you this from personal experience since at one time I was a frequent visitor to those bars, working in the industry which the character is attempting to break into and staying at the same hotel in which he is staying, going out in the evenings to drink in those bars. So it is from an extensive firsthand knowledge that I can tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was nothing horrid or hellish about any of those establishments, and that even the character's comparison of them to Purgatory goes much too far, an unwarranted slur. Because in fact they were nothing more than ordinary little workingmen's bars. Plain and a bit rundown perhaps, but that was to be expected considering the neighborhood in which they were located. That neighborhood which had so clearly seen better days.

And then what about the nature of the people who patronized those bars, you may ask. Were we the denizens of Hell such as we have been portrayed in the story? Certainly not! We were a friendly bunch is what we were, an outgoing bunch. We were good old boys each and every one of us. Men who worked with our hands and worked hard for a living. Deckhands and laborers and roustabouts, along with the occasional cook or dishwasher. And whenever we went out for a drink in those bars, we were always there for a good time and nothing more. Relaxing and drinking beer and enjoying the company of others who were just like ourselves. Talking or listening to country music or playing pool, and we were never known to get into fights with anyone who didn't deserve it. Anyone who didn't come in there looking for trouble.

Though fight we would if we had to, because that was how we were. People you didn't want to mess with. People who prized our toughness above all else, even above life itself, so that we were always ready to go at it at the drop of a hat. Fists or knives or guns, you name it, we were ready to take you on. Ready to give you more trouble than you could handle if you came in there with an attitude. Ready to give you an attitude adjustment.

Which was why it was always best to get onto our good side when you entered that hard-nosed little world. Our joking side. Because even more than a good fight, what we loved to do in those bars was to play jokes. Practical jokes which we would pull on one another from time to time, though we especially loved playing them on yankees whenever one was so unwise as to fall into our clutches. Those yankees who for some reason always seemed to fall for our jokes in the way that only a yankee can, hook-line-and-sinker. The way that the character in the book has just done, and also the way that the victim did in the joke which that scene has reminded me of. A joke which a group of us played on a yankee one day as he sat innocently in our midst, and one that had to be among the best we ever pulled off.

It all began late one afternoon at what could be called happy hour if such a thing had existed in a bar where drinks were always the cheapest in town. A place in which every hour was happy hour if you wanted it to be. It began when one of our group, JimBob by name, noticed on his way into the bar that there was a car with Massachusetts plates parked a short distance down the street. And so assuming that the owner of the vehicle must be inside, he went directly into his act, charging into the bar as though he were in a state of high excitement and yelling out, "Man, did ya hear that crash?"

Crash? No, none of us had heard a thing, and as yet we weren't in on the joke. Not until after a few more lines had come out of his mouth.

"Jeez, I sure feel sorry for that guy with the blue Toyota, cause he's in some mighty deep shit."

"Blue Toyota!?" The yankee was on his feet in an instant. "What happened?"

"Is it yours, man? Massachusetts plates?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well ya better run! And I mean right now. Ya better get outa here fore the law comes."

"The law...? The what...?" The yankee sounded lost.

As meanwhile JimBob went on. "Yeah, cause you're in deep shit, man. You're like... I mean, you're lookin' at doin' some hard time is what."

"Hard time? For what? What'd I do?"

"Ya parked your car down the street there, didn't ya?"

"Yeah..."

“Well that big crash ya just heard was a truck runnin’ right into it.”

“A truck!?” The yankee made as though to run outside and see what had happened to his car, forcing JimBob to get in his way and stop him.

“Don’t you be goin’ out there. Ya gotta get the fuck outa town is what ya gotta do. Ya gotta get out now.”

“But my car...”

“Yeah man, it’s toast. That truck went and hit it, and then it smashed into two or three more cars, and the next thing ya know, it goes right through a store window. Right through it!”

“My car...” The yankee was practically crying now.

“Yeah, so ya gotta get outa town. Cause that’s three cars and a building ya went and fucked up. So you’re gonna be... Man, that’s a shit-load-a money you’re gonna have to pay off.”

“Pay off? Me!?”

“Yeah, a course.”

“Me!!? But I didn’t... My car was... It was parked out there.”

“Yeah, sure it was. But like I tell ya, it was a truck went and hit it.”

“A truck...?” The yankee said as though the word held no meaning for him.

“Yeah, a truck. Sure as shit! And ya know, trucks always got the right-a-way around here.”

“Trucks have the...?” The yankee looked around at the rest of us who, playing along by now, nodded our heads in agreement. “Yeah, that’s right, they sure do,” one guy added with conviction.

“Yes sir, so now ya gotta pay for all that shit, man,” JimBob went on. “And ya gotta pay for the damage to the truck, too.”

“The damage to the truck!? But how could it...? My car was parked, so how could it be my fault?”

“It don’t matter if you was parked or what, cause trucks got the right-a-way around here.”

“Over parked cars?” The yankee’s voice was completely incredulous by now. “How could they...?”

“They do, man. And parked cars gotta stay the hell outa the way-a trucks.”

“But it was legally parked. It was...”

“It don’t matter about that, man, cause ya didn’t stay outa the way-a that there truck.”

“But how could I...? How can a parked car...?”

“So I tell ya what,” JimBob cut off the guy’s whining. “Ya better get outa here, and quick. Cause me, I wouldn’t wanta pay for all them damages. And that’s not to mention all the jail-time you’re gonna be facin’.”

“Jail-time!!? For parking my car?”

“Yeah, damn right.”

“For parking it legally!?”

“I told ya, it don’t matter legal or illegal, cause it was a truck went and hit it.”

“A truck...?” The yankee was so distraught by then that the word barely came out. And he looked all around at those of us present with the appearance of a man in a state of shock. Unable to comprehend the nightmare into which his life had been so suddenly and so inexplicably plunged. Frozen in place and begging with his eyes to be told that it wasn’t true, that it was nothing but a bad dream from which he would soon awaken.

He looked from face to face. Pleading. Imploring. Practically getting down on his knees. Until finally one of the guys could hold it in no longer. Had to break down and start laughing, followed by all the rest.

RUSTBUCKET

Gabe couldn’t take it anymore. After two nights of drinking, he’d had all he could stand of that wretched little world. That neighborhood and those bars. He’d had more than anyone should be forced to endure, because it was all so dreary and depressing. And so pointless. That mindless existence of beer and pool and the company of losers. And even the presence of the one worthwhile person in the entire area wouldn’t have been enough to make another night of it bearable. Another night of so-called fat times. And so rather than going out with his good-hearted but simple-minded friend on Sunday night, Gabe preferred to spend his time alone instead. Sober for the first time in days and reading as he gathered strength for the challenges of the coming day, that Monday on which he would have to resume his job search. The King of Hell of a few nights before suddenly reduced to the status of a beggar, of a man forced to go from company to company begging for a job. Begging.

Which was precisely what he set out to do when Monday morning rolled around at last. That dreaded Monday. He went back to making the rounds of the supply-boat companies. Back to dealing with those head-up-their-ass rednecks who did the hiring, back to groveling at their feet and asking them, Please, please, can I please have a job. Back to...

Enough! By lunchtime Gabe knew that his search was over, that he just couldn't take it anymore. Knew that he had come to the end of the line, the end of his long downward spiral. Having sunk as low as he could possibly allow himself to go, so that from that point on he would have to... have to... Do what? Have to give up and go back to the Lakes, he supposed. Have to admit that he hadn't been able to do it, hadn't been good enough to get himself a job on one of those... Or wait a minute! Hadn't been good enough!? What the hell was he thinking? Not good enough to work on one of those old rustbuckets running out to the rigs? That couldn't be! So there had to be some other answer, something else that he could do besides admitting defeat and giving up completely.

And it wasn't until Gabe sat reading the local newspaper while eating a sandwich in some poor excuse for a delicatessen that the solution to his problems suddenly presented itself to him, his eyes lighting upon a want ad which he had seen in the paper each day but to which he had previously paid no heed. It was an ad from a manning agency, claiming to be able to get anyone a job in the offshore oil industry. Rigs or supply-boats, you name it, no experience necessary. And as Gabe read the ad a second time and a third, he told himself that perhaps that was what he needed to do: go down to that agency and let them do the hard work of getting him the job that he wanted. For a fee, of course.

Because by that time he was desperate enough to try just about anything, maybe even desperate enough to go out and buy himself a job. So that while the whole thing may have reeked of surrender, of admitting that he was incapable of standing on his own two feet and getting himself a job in any other way, still it represented less of a defeat than did the only other option which he could see before him. The option of dropping his dream altogether, forgetting about that unlimited license and heading back to the Lakes. The option of complete surrender, as opposed to partial.

But even the option of partial surrender was a hard choice for him to make. Far too big a decision to be made over a single sandwich, as instead it was something which he would have to sleep on, perhaps even seek out a sympathetic ear in the meantime. Look for someone who would be willing to listen as he talked the thing through. And since Gary was the only person to whom he could turn right then—unless he wanted to telephone his parents or his straight-arrow brothers or the ex-girlfriend who had dumped him, that is—he knew that he would have to find the guy and talk to him that evening.

Have to hang around the lobby until the big guy showed up and then invite him out for a bite to eat. And the questions were weighing so heavily upon his mind by the time his friend arrived at the old hotel that Gabe could hardly wait until they had walked the few blocks and slid into their favorite booth at the local greasy-spoon before he began to unburden himself. Began to talk about his future and the huge decision which he had to make. Or at least he began to talk around that decision, talking about dreams and whether or not they are worth all the hassle they can involve. Whether sometimes it's better just to forget about them and return to the old ways instead. Because while he may never have said it in so many words, what he was weighing right then was a return to that old life of his, that comfortable and predictable yet boring existence. That job whose horizons stretched no further than the far side of the lake. It was an uninviting prospect, but if the Mate's job he wanted was going to cost him so much effort and such ongoing

damage to his pride, he didn't know that it would be worth it. Having already stooped so low but now facing the prospect of stooping even lower.

Being as reticent as he was to personalize the discussion, it took Gabe quite some time before he ever got around to the subject of the agency, finally throwing out the idea as casually as he could, as though it were something of little import. Mentioning it so offhandedly that he was surprised by Gary's quick reaction, by the way he immediately seized upon the idea. "Hey, ya think maybe they could get me on, too?" he asked with rising enthusiasm. "Cause things don't look so good down at the hall, and me, I don't got shit for a card. So ya know if I could just like... I mean, if I get out on one-a them supply-boats for awhile, and I let my card age and all that shit, and then by the time I get back, man I'm gonna have me a killer-card, ya know, and I'm gonna get me a good ship."

Yes, that was true, he certainly could do that, Gabe had to agree. Until almost before he even knew what was happening, he found that somehow he had become part of a team. His decision already made for him.

And so it was as a team that the two of them went down to the agency together the next morning, down to a little hole-in-the-wall office in some building downtown where they walked in to find a youngish man seated behind the only desk in the room, a businessman-type of their own generation, casually dressed as befitted the industry. A man who got up to greet them as they entered, introducing himself as Chris something-or-other, the owner of the agency—and obviously its only employee—after which he brought out a couple of application forms for them to fill out.

And Chris was clearly impressed by Gary as he looked him over. He was impressed by the guy's size and his build, and he was even more impressed when he saw what was written on his z-card. Unlimited AB. So that practically ignoring Gabe, Chris addressed his first real question to the big man. "So tell me, _____," he began, using a name which Gabe had never heard before though evidently the one written on the z-card. "Are ya lookin' for a permanent slot, or do ya just want somethin' temporary?"

"My name's Gary. I go by Gary," he corrected Chris before going on to say that he really didn't know. He wasn't sure how long he would be at it since he had never tried working on supply-boats before.

"Well, there's lotsa chances around here. There's lotsa places I can get ya on. And good payin' ones, too."

"Oh yeah? And him, too?" Gary pointed at Gabe as he spoke.

"Him? Sure! There's lotsa openings for ABs around here. Like there's..."

"But he's no AB, he's a Mate. He's got a license," Gary cut him off insistently.

To which Chris responded blandly, "Yeah, I saw that." No sign of enthusiasm in his voice, no sign of encouragement. And as Gabe heard those words and that tone, as he thought about the quizzical look which had come over Chris's face when he looked at the license, he had

a bad feeling about where this process was going to lead them. Because he could see it coming already. The dead-end. The offer of an AB slot or nothing. He could just...

"We're in this together, ya know," Gary said with conviction, evidently aware of the direction in which things were heading as well. "We're lookin' to get on a ship together, the two of us or nothin'. Him as Mate and me as AB."

"Together...?" Chris sounded tentative as he glanced at Gabe who said nothing back, only nodded his assent.

"Yeah together. With him as Mate."

"Together..."

The conversation went downhill pretty quickly from there, Chris having little to say as he read the applications, and as he especially studied the endorsements on Gabe's license. Looking them over as though they were written in some foreign language, as though they might be more intelligible if he were to turn the paper sideways. And in the end all he could tell them was, "I'll see what I can do." He wasn't going to promise them anything, not like he would have if Gabe had been willing to settle for an AB's job. And then as he asked them where they could be reached in case something were to come up, his response to the official name of the hotel was, "Oh, Miss Flossy's? Sure, I already got the number for there."

And evidently he did have the number as some two days later, Miss Flossy came by to bang on Gabe's door and tell him that he had a phone call waiting for him downstairs. He had someone calling about a job for him and his friend who didn't happen to be there at the time.

A job!? Gabe said to himself as he jumped up and went charging downstairs to take the call, a rush of adrenaline shooting through him as he went. The sudden recognition by his body of the importance of that call which he was about to answer, that call which could mark the beginning of a whole new life for him. One in which he would be sailing as Mate, first aboard a supply-boat and then later aboard who knew what. Aboard freighters perhaps, sailing off to exotic ports, off to romance and adventure on the far side of the world. Off to the life of a real, true seaman.

"Hey, good news. I got a job for ya."

"Yeah...?" Gabe didn't like the sound of the voice coming over the telephone line, and his guard immediately began to go up despite the adrenaline flow. Because the guy's cheeriness sounded way too forced, way too phony.

"Yeah, it's a job for both-a ya, startin' day after tomorrow. Mate and AB on a supply-boat runnin' outa ____." Chris named some town which Gabe had never heard of before, soon went on to explain further when that information was met with silence. "It's down by the mouth-a the ____," he added, naming a river of whose existence Gabe was vaguely aware, though one which he would have been incapable of locating on a map.

"So you say it's, uh... It's a Mate's job?"

“Yeah, it sure is. But I tell ya, it wasn’t an easy thing for me to find. Not when ya got no experience. And it’s just... It’s pure luck I found ya this job so fast.”

“Oh yeah?” It didn’t sound good to Gabe, the way the guy was starting right out with excuses. It wasn’t a good sign for what was to come next. And his adrenaline level was falling fast as he heard those same excuses being repeated in one form or another at the end of each sentence that Chris uttered, telling him the name of the ship and the company and even the name of the captain.

Though all the while there was one subject that the guy said nothing about. A subject he seemed to be avoiding until finally Gabe brought it up himself. “So what’s the pay?”

“The pay? It’s, uh... It’s not all that good, but it’s... Remember, I get a percentage of it, so it’s the best I could do. Believe me. And if I coulda got ya somethin’ higher, I’d be makin’ more money myself. Remember that! So it’s...”

“How much?”

“It’s, uh... It’s forty-five dollars a day.”

“Forty-five!? That’s for...?”

“That’s what ya make as Mate. And it’s actually pretty good, too, for a guy with no experience.”

“Forty-five...” It was a hard number for Gabe to digest, because while he had known that pay was low in that scab-industry he was entering, he hadn’t realized that it could be that low. And it took some moments before he was able to form his next question. “So it’s forty-five bucks, and you get ten percent of that and then... What? Do you get it on the overtime, too?”

“Overtime...?” It sounded like Chris hadn’t been expecting that question at all. “No, it’s just... It’s only on the base.”

“Well okay, that’s not so bad. So then tell me, what’s the overtime rate?”

“The overtime? Oh ya don’t, uh... There’s no, uh... There’s no overtime, actually,” Chris spit it out at last. Before quickly going on to add, “Cause remember, ya don’t got any experience, and with that license-a yours...”

Or in other words, what he was saying was that this job which he had lined up for them was the bottom of the barrel. The absolute bottom. As low as a seaman could possibly go. And as hard as it was for Gabe to accept that fact, it only got worse when he said at one point that he couldn’t speak for his friend. He couldn’t guarantee that Gary would be willing to go along with it and work for such low wages, even lower than his own since the guy would be sailing as AB. Because the moment he said those words, Chris came back to tell him that without Gary, the whole thing was off. That the deal was for both of them or neither. Because it seemed that even the lowest of the low didn’t want to have anything to do with him, and the only reason they were willing to take him on was because of his friend.

Oh, what a blow that was to Gabe's self-image, what a cruel undermining of the minimal level of self-respect which he still retained. Such a blow that he could hardly finish the conversation after that. He could ask no further questions, and the only thing he was able to say at the close was that he would pass the information on to Gary. He would tell him to call back and give their decision.

Can you believe that? Gabe moaned to himself after he had hung up. Even some floating death-trap doesn't want me! Even some rusted out piece of shit.

When it came to Gary's reaction to the news, though, Gabe was surprised at just how well the guy took it. Even the part about the low pay, base only with no overtime and no vacation pay—and a very low base at that. Because it all seemed to bounce right off him as his face lit up. "So we're goin' to work, huh?" he burst out merrily. Adding a moment later, "Shit, that wasn't so hard gettin' a job."

Gary wanted to go out and celebrate that night, and if he hadn't been so insistent about it, Gabe never would have agreed to go along. Agreed to go part way at least, to go have a couple of beers at the Shamrock, though that was all. No more than two or three since he wasn't in the mood to celebrate that new job which in so many ways represented a huge step backward in his life and career. That job which was sure to be his worst ever. And so he drank his beers solemnly, sharing none of the cheer that Gary attempted to spread. And he also avoided the pool table while they were there, not wanting to return to that dark place in his head where he had been a few nights before. Not then, not ever.

And Gabe was hardly in a better mood when the big day rolled around. When Chris showed up early in the morning to drive them to the ship. All part of the service, he had said, though the real motivation behind it remained unclear. Whether he did so because it was the only way for him to make sure that they would actually show up—and that he would be paid—or because of the simple fact that out where they were going, there was no such thing as public transportation.

Gabe was nervous as he sat in the front seat of the guy's big new Cadillac, Gary having insisted that as Mate he should have the honor, but it wasn't the nerves of anticipation that he was feeling. No, it was something much closer to dread, a feeling that he was on his way to do something that he would come to regret. And given those doubts which were eating away at him, he had nothing to contribute to the desultory conversation which took place in the car as they drove along. Because he was way beyond small-talk by then, so far beyond that he barely heard the others as they spoke, Chris spewing out drivel from time to time and Gary answering him from the backseat. And all of it going right past Gabe who sat stoically as he awaited his fate, the point of no return already passed at the moment he entered the car, so that now there was nothing left to do but to go through with it. To go to work on the worst ship ever.

Chris drove along the Interstate for a hundred miles, two hundred, before turning off on a state highway heading south toward the coast, and then for the next hour or so, that was where he took them. South past towns and farmland and industrial buildings which soon began to thin out as they left the freeway behind, even the houses growing fewer and further between with each passing mile, while at the same time the land around them became ever marshier. A land more

suited to ducks and mosquitoes than it was to human beings. Until finally they arrived at the end of the road, a small town beyond which there was nothing but marsh and the waters of the Gulf.

Chris turned where the road dead-ended in town, and he drove through the block-long downtown and past a little fishing harbor, past a couple of industrial-looking docks with small storage tanks located nearby, those docks where apparently the supplies for the oil-rigs were loaded, and he kept on going all the way to the end of the road. The end of the world, it seemed to Gabe as they pulled to a stop by what looked like the remains of some ancient wooden docks. Old pilings sticking up here and there, accompanied in one or two places by the last still-standing sections of what must once have been the actual dock, while sitting right there in the middle of it all, the crowning glory of that scene of ruin and decay, was the rustiest ship that Gabe had ever seen. The *Baroid Bullet*. His home for the next few weeks.

The name was barely visible through the rust that covered every surface, and not only was she in horrible condition, but at the same time she was smaller than what he had been expecting. Smaller than current industry standards, being an early version of a supply-boat which had somehow been kept afloat during all those years. Other than her size, though, she was quite typical in her design, with the house located all the way forward while the rest of the ship was one big, flat open deck used for carrying supplies to the rigs. The only things sticking up anywhere back there a couple of small stacks, one located on each side of the open deck a little more than halfway back.

“Looks a little old, don’t she?” said Gary with his usual understatement as he grabbed his seabag from the trunk of the car.

“Yeah, she’s been runnin’ a long time,” Chris put the best spin on it that he could.

While as for Gabe, he said nothing. Daring not to speak at that moment since he knew what would come out if he were to open his mouth. And so he held his silence instead as he pulled his own bag from the trunk and headed toward the little piece of intact dock against which the port quarter of the ship sat. The left side of the stern. And still he said nothing as he stepped over the bulwark and started forward along the empty deck, nothing to be seen out there but huge blisters of rust. Ignoring the last-minute encouragement and advice that Chris had to offer as they went along since he had already listened to all the lies that he ever cared to hear from that guy. A sentiment which even Gary seemed to share by then. Not a word to say in response, not a grunt.

Because it was all so unbelievable. The ship was even worse than Gabe had seen it in his nightmares. Worse because it was real. Dirty and cramped and hot, especially in the afternoons since the portholes and window scoops only brought an occasional slight breeze into that steam-bath of a house. And the crew! What a motley collection they turned out to be, the first shipmate he met upon entering the house that day being such a typical-looking inbred southern redneck piece of white trash that a picture of him could have served as a dictionary definition of the type. And when that redneck saw the group of them enter—Billie the Engineer, as he turned out to be—his face broke out into the stupidest grin that Gabe had ever seen.

“Well, will ya look at what we got here!” Billie drawled out. “We got us a jewboy and the Jolly Green Giant.”

It took an effort on Gabe's part to hold himself back when he heard those words. To avoid getting into his first fight right then and there. And he might have done so anyway if Chris hadn't eased the tension somewhat by laughing at the idiotic joke. Chris laughing and Gary smiling benignly like a guy who knew what it takes to humor rednecks.

It wasn't long before they met the rest of the crew. Joe the Assistant Engineer, if you could call him that. Though in truth, the word Engineer was a complete misnomer since neither he nor Billie were even competent mechanics, the only thing they were qualified to do being to sit and watch the diesel engines as they ran. And when it came to looks and personality, Joe could have been Billie's brother. Or maybe his son. Or maybe both at the same time: his brother and his son and perhaps even his cousin as well. Whatever the case may have been, though, the two of them were so similar in their looks and their speech and their attitudes—and in their dismally low level of intelligence—that Gabe soon took to calling them Billie-Joe. As though they were a single person who just happened to inhabit two bodies.

The Captain, Frank, was another redneck. Not as hardcore as the other two, though he was even goofier looking, a dumb grin always on his face, freckles and his ears sticking out so that he looked like some close relative of Howdy Doody. And then finally there was the cook, Dave or Davy as he was generally called, a resident of New Orleans and the only person aboard that ship with any level of culture at all as far as Gabe was concerned. The only one capable of discussing anything besides cars or TV shows or hunting and fishing. Hunting trips on which those goofballs must surely have been in greater danger of being shot—by each other—than were any of the animals they were after. With Davy, though, Gabe could talk about all sorts of things. Or at least he could talk about them when only the two of them were around, or perhaps with Gary, though never when any of the rednecks were in the room, their presence making the already timid Davy clam up altogether. But when it was only the two of them there, they would go on and on, talking about art and literature and even current events, Gabe actually getting something in response to what he had to say besides the, "I ain't into politics," of Gary or the, "We oughta shoot em all," of the rednecks.

The accommodations on the ship were by far the worst that Gabe had ever seen, the tiny forward house containing nothing but a galley/messroom area and two cabins meant to accommodate the entire crew between them. One for the engineers and the cook, and the other for the deck department: the Captain and Gabe in the two lower bunks while Gary, being the AB, took the upper berth above Gabe.

It was hardly what he had been counting upon, but Gabe told himself that he could take it for a little while, the next two weeks or three weeks or whatever it was going to be. Chris hadn't been very clear on that subject, talking one minute about two-weeks-on-one-week-off and then later saying things about three weeks or even four. And so with Gabe wanting to clarify the situation, he brought it up to the Captain at supper on his first evening aboard. He asked him what exactly the rotation was with that company.

Asked only to be answered by Billie, speaking in that dumbass style of his. "Shit! Didn't they tell ya? We ain't got no schedule on here. We just work till they send someone down is all. Cause they don't never got enough people stupid enough to work on this here ship. So ya just

gotta wait. And what with you and your girlfriend wantin' to go everywhere together, shit man! You guys're gonna be on here till you're a couple-a old men."

Or in other words, they were stuck. So far out in the boonies that it would have been foolhardy to quit, and with dim prospects of being relieved in any decent length of time. And since Gabe soon discovered that all their shipmates had only recently come aboard, that meant they were going to be trapped on that ship with the same cast of characters for the foreseeable future. Until the company was able to come up with another group of suckers to send down and take their places.

The work on the ship wasn't hard, as it turned out, only strange, having to work all sorts of oddball hours since they might be called upon at any time of the day or night to make a run. To shift over to the working docks and load up with drilling mud or a deck cargo of some sort—the *Bullet* also had tanks for water and diesel fuel, but since no one trusted the condition or cleanliness of those tanks, they were almost never used. Then once the cargo had been loaded, they would steam out to one rig or another to discharge it, making their way there through a technique known as Coonass Navigation, as Gabe soon came to learn. Using it despite the fact that there wasn't a single coonass aboard, only run-of-the-mill rednecks.

What Coonass Navigation consisted of in those days was the use of a magnetic compass and a grid-chart that showed the location of all the drilling-lease blocks in the Gulf, each block containing a code number. So that in order to get from one place to another, a person would simply lay down a course that went from where he was to the block where the rig was supposed to be located, looking around for it once he got there. And if ever the navigator was uncertain as to his present location, all he had to do was to approach the nearest rig and read the block-number which would be posted on a big sign. Read the number and then lay out a new course from that block to his destination.

Once they had found the rig, they would drop the anchor and then back up toward it, Gabe's job being to tend the anchor-windlass while Gary and Billie-Joe—one or both versions of him—would go to the stern to tie off the lines which the crane on the rig lowered down to them. And as he stood alone out there on the bow during those maneuvers, Gabe would do his best to keep all strain off the anchor, fearing that with the condition of the chain and windlass being what they were, the condition of the entire bow, in fact, there was no telling what might happen if he ever got careless. No telling what might break and carry away.

After the *Bullet* had been secured to the rig, the next job would be for them to set up the hose for pumping mud, or if they were carrying a deck cargo, simply to stand back while the rig lowered a couple of roustabouts to hook up the loads. When it was powdered mud that they were carrying, though, which was most of the time, it would be up to Gabe to keep an eye on things throughout the process, watching the ship as one of the Engineers did the actual pumping. Billie-Joe in one body or the other. And while the old tradition on that ship was for the Mate and Engineer on duty to sit around talking as the pump did its work, Gabe broke with that right from day one, preferring to keep to himself instead since he had nothing in common with Billie-Joe in either of his incarnations. Nothing in the world to talk about.

From time to time Billie-Joe would come up on deck to say that it was time to switch tanks, which meant that with a design as old and primitive as that on the *Bullet*, they would have to disconnect the end of the hose from the manifold and then reconnect it to another tank, each of them having its own separate header on that ship. Gabe would have to do it, to be exact, he along with Gary who would come out to help. To swing the little hand-sledge which was used for connecting and disconnecting the hoses—this being a coonass operation where no one had ever heard of a spanner wrench like those for which the hoses were designed, so that instead there would be nothing but a lot of banging away with the hammer. Banging and banging until the hose was tight or loose, on or off.

When the cargo was finished at last, Gabe would raise the anchor, doing so slowly and carefully and praying all the while that it would come up without tearing the bow off the ship. Ignoring the Captain's pleas to go faster since this was their lives that he was dealing with here. It was his own life which he had no desire to sacrifice for the greater glory of that company and its profit margin. And then finally they would head for home via Coonass Navigation, usually going straight to the so-called lay berth where Gabe and Gary had first joined the ship. Pulling in stern-first and tying up by lassoing the pilings that stood up here and there, throwing the lines so that the eyes on the ends of them went right over the tops of the pilings.

It was a weird way of doing things. A coonass way. And it took Gabe quite a few tries before he learned to do it well, Billie-Joe laughing at him each time that he missed, talking one Billie-Joe to the other about how yankees never could do things like that. They laughed at Gabe though never at Gary when he threw the lines, not after the first time anyway. Because somehow Gary already knew the technique. He knew how to hold the side of the eye and then throw it so that it stayed open like a lasso. So that while Billie-Joe may have started out laughing at him that first day, saying something about, "Dumbass yankee, ya can't make it from clear back there," as the big guy threw, they had been silenced in an instant when Gary made it first try, throwing it from a distance that was twice what either of them was capable of doing.

And it wasn't only when it came to throwing lines that Gary seemed to fit in so much better than he did, Gabe soon came to see. It was in everything they did, living and associating with that bunch of rednecks. Putting up with their bullshit and their stupidity, which Gary managed to do with his usual quiet good humor, while with Gabe it grated on him something awful. It ate away at him somewhere down inside, somewhere in the deepest recesses of his being. Because wasn't it already bad enough that he had to do such stupid things as part of his job? Using hammers instead of wrenches and practicing Coonass Navigation. He who had gone to all the trouble of learning celestial navigation in order to get his license, now finding himself navigating with nothing but a grid-chart and a compass. It was such a huge comedown, almost embarrassing for him to admit, and he frequently asked himself if this was really what he wanted to be doing. If this job was actually a stepping stone to the brighter future which he dreamed of, or if it was a huge step backward that he was taking. Working on a ship that was barely a quarter-step above the push-boats that he so looked down upon. A broken-down ship with an incompetent crew.

Because the crew, that was the real problem around there. It wasn't the work he had to do so much. He could put up with that, and he could even put up with the sense of shame that he felt at doing things in such stupid ways. But the crew? Having to live with all those rednecks was

almost more than he could bear, and he soon came to treasure those rare moments when none of them were around. When he could sit in the messroom with Davy or Gary or both, talking comfortably and being himself for once, saying the things he really thought rather than holding them in and walking away in order to avoid a fight.

Why, it was so bad that he couldn't even sit and listen to those guys when they talked, not after the first couple of days he couldn't. Not when everything they said struck such a nerve with him. Every word coming out of their mouths. And especially so when they would start in on Davy, the most defenseless member of the crew, with the two versions of Billie-Joe going after him and calling him one name after another. Calling him sweetheart or using female names, obviously convinced that because of his rather effeminate manners, he had to be gay. And they would have absolutely no mercy on him, telling gay-jokes and then laughing in his face, Billie-Joe with the Captain laughing along as well. And meanwhile Davy would try to keep his distance, try to act like he couldn't hear.

Oh, it was horrible, and Gabe couldn't understand why it was that Davy never fought back. Why he didn't just tell those guys to fuck off. And even when he got a chance to ask him about it one day, still he failed to understand the reply, Davy coming back with an, "Oh, they're just kidding," said in a tone of resignation. A tone of that's-just-the-way-things-are-around-here. Because what did he mean by that? What was the guy talking about? Things aren't like that unless you allow them to be. Things are the way you make them, and you don't have to sit back and put up with that type of injustice if you don't want to. You can fight back instead. You can stand up for your rights. Stand up and be a man.

Davy didn't seem to see things in that way, though. And if he wasn't ready to fight back, then what was Gabe to do? He couldn't go taking on the guy's fights for him, could he? But at the same time it was getting harder and harder each day to go on biting his tongue and saying nothing. Hearing and seeing all those offensive things while doing nothing in response, a witness to injustice who was too timid to do anything about it. Too cowardly to take a stand. Too... No!! That wasn't Gabe! He had never been that type of person, not even when he was small. He had always fought for what he thought was right, so that the moral pain of doing nothing while those rednecks abused his friend was almost too much to take. Too much even for the defeated and demoralized Gabe who was working on that broken-down old rustbucket.

And it was way too much for him to take on that day when things finally came to a head. That day when it all got to him at last, the heat and the crowding and the stupidity of his shipmates. That day when he knew that he couldn't put up with it for one more minute. It was a day when the ship sat idle at the lay berth awaiting orders, with the whole crew seated together at supper in the sweltering messroom, not a breath of air coming through the portholes while the fan in the room did nothing to help. Nothing to ease Gabe's discomfort at the heat and humidity, and certainly nothing for the even greater discomfort he felt at the sorry spectacle which he was being forced to watch.

Billie-Joe were going after Davy worse than ever on that day, the two versions of him working like a tag-team, taking turns in which they constantly tried to outdo one another. Telling jokes and calling him names while Davy retreated as far back into the galley as he could go, cringed visibly even with his back turned as the two of them went on and on. With the Captain

laughing along all the while, even Gary grinning weakly at times. And all of them having a great old time, it appeared. All of them except Davy, that is. And Gabe. The victim and his one and only sympathizer. Though even with all the abuse he was witnessing, still Gabe might have done nothing that day, might have remained a sympathizer and nothing more, had it not been for Billie-Joe's decision to take things yet another step further. The Joe-version of him getting up all at once to go after Davy in a physical way while the Billie-version rambled on as a distraction. Saying something about limp wrists and frilly underwear while his partner snuck up from behind, until suddenly Joe reached out and pinched Davy on the butt, both of them laughing hysterically as the poor guy jumped. Laughing away while Joe zeroed in for another...

"Leave him alone!!" Gabe boomed out all at once, stopping the guy in his tracks. His stand for justice taken. Announced to the world and to himself as well.

"Shit, boy. Whatta you...?" Billie began to whine.

"And you shut the fuck up!" Gabe shouted him down in his hardest fighting-voice. One that meant exactly what it said. Shut up or else! A voice so fierce that it seemed to stun the entire room, no one daring to speak for some moments after that, no one daring to breathe. The only sound to be heard the whirring of the fan.

Gabe looked around the room in defiance, glaring at Billie-Joe and the Captain, all of whom turned away. All afraid to meet his eyes. And since Davy kept his back turned the whole time as though he didn't want to get involved, it was only Gary who was brave enough to look back at him. Though the guy did so with a look of such bewilderment on his face as to make it clear that he had no idea what all the fuss was about.

The silence went on in that way for second after uneasy second, until finally the Billie-version turned to the Joe-version, looking as far away from Gabe's direction as he could though speaking in a tone that was obviously meant for all to hear. "Hey, did I ever tell ya that joke about the yankee jewboy faggot?"

"No!! And you're not gonna tell him about it now, either!" Gabe cut him off before he could say more, speaking in a tone that wiped the smirk right off the guy's face.

And the silence wasn't broken again for some time after that. Not until Frank the Captain took it upon himself to speak up at last, looking as stupid as ever even without the grin on his face as he did his best to muster an air of authority. One that unfortunately came out more like pleading than it did than it did like the voice of command. "Come on now, take it easy," he whined. "The guys was just jokin'."

"Well, you tell em to keep their stupid-ass jokes to themselves," Gabe shot back. "Tell em that jokes like that are over with on this ship. Tell em that there's not gonna be any more harassment taking place around here."

"Harassment...?"

"Yes, harassment! Cause that's exactly what it was. They were harassing the cook. But that's all over with now. It's finished!"

“Harassment...?” The Captain still didn’t seem to understand what he was talking about, while no one else seemed even to care, the Billie-Joes looking away as though they hadn’t heard a thing and Gary acting as though he had developed a sudden obsession with his meal. Looking nowhere but his plate as he shoveled food into his mouth.

And so with his own interest in food having disappeared all at once, Gabe saw nothing more left to do right then but to make an exit. As dramatic an exit as possible. “I’m serious about this,” he said with more sincerity than volume as he got up and carried his plate into the galley. “There’s not gonna be any more harassment taking place on this ship. None!” And then after dumping the uneaten food into the garbage and depositing the plate in the sink, he barked out a final, “None!!” before sauntering off toward the room he shared.

Closing the door behind him as he went, shutting himself off from the others despite the stifling heat inside that room, as suddenly he heard them return to life. All the rednecks speaking at once. “What the fuck’s he talkin’ about harassment?” and, “You believe that fuckin’ commie kike?” and, “Motherfuckin’ commie! We used to kill them motherfuckers over in Nam!”

Gabe didn’t reopen the door until after enough time had passed to be sure that the others would be gone, sticking his head out and looking around to find that only Davy remained in the area, still cleaning up in the galley. As Gabe went up to him, though, he wasn’t quite sure how to begin. “Hey, uh...”

“Don’t you talk to me!” Davy shot back. “I don’t wanta know anything about you.”

“You what...?”

“You can’t go doin’ stuff like that! Not around here, you can’t. This ship’s way too small for that, so you’ve gotta get along. You can’t just... Oh please, leave me alone.” Davy practically whispered that last as he turned his attention back to the pots and pans.

“Hey come on, man,” Gabe pleaded, unable to believe what he was hearing. Unsure how to react to a reception that was so much colder than the hero’s welcome he had been expecting.

“Don’t talk to me! I’ve gotta live here, ya know. I’ve gotta live in the same room with those two!” Davy said with finality as he turned his back completely.

So that, “Sorry,” was the only thing left for Gabe to say as he took his leave, baffled and wondering what he had gotten himself into on that broken-down little ship. What he had gotten the whole group of them into. Davy and the rednecks and... What about Gary? Where was he right then? And where did he stand on the issue? Was he with Gabe or was he against him? Whose side was he on and where was he at that moment and what was he thinking?

He came across his oversized friend out in the cool evening air on deck, the only other person still aboard as he was soon to discover, all the rednecks having headed off to the only bar in town to drown their troubles and curse at yankees and commies and just about everyone else. But then as he made his approach, Gabe found that while he may have felt an urgent need for answers to his questions right then, he also felt a weird sort of shyness. He felt hesitant and

almost afraid to begin, perhaps somewhat burned by Davy's reaction. "Nice night, huh?" he said at last.

"Yeah, like all of em around here." Gary's voice was bland, giving away nothing about what he thought or felt.

"Nice when ya get outside and away from all that..."

"Yeah."

"So what, uh...? Whatta you...?" Gabe had never been one to engage in small-talk when there was something on his mind. He had always been a person who takes the direct approach. "Whatta you think about... you know?"

"Oh that?" Gary stared off into the fast-gathering darkness as though he didn't want to answer. "It was kinda..."

"Kinda what? Do you think I came on too strong?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"Do you really? You think I shouldn't have...?" Gabe didn't know how to finish the question.

Which Gary probably wouldn't have known how to answer in any case. "I don't know, man."

"So you think I should've let those guys keep going after Davy the way they were? You think I shouldn't have tried to help him?" Gabe's juices were starting to flow all at once. His passion for justice making a full-fledged return for the first time in years, it seemed. "You think I should have sat back while they harassed a friend of mine? While they said all that stuff and made his life miserable?"

"Harassed him? Is that what they...?"

"Sure as shit, man! Sure as shit that's what they were doing. They were harassing the hell out of Davy. Your friend Davy! They were calling him all those names, and they were... Why, couldn't you see the way he was reacting to it all? The way those things were hurting him?"

"Were they...?"

"Yes, of course they were! Those guys were doing terrible things to him. All that gay-bashing and that... that... Why, it was so obvious what they were doing. And what the rest of you were doing, too! The way that everyone was sitting back and going along with it."

"Were we? Ya mean we...?" Gary asked with an air of guilt creeping into his voice.

"By doing nothing, yes you were! You were contributing to what was happening. You were..." Gabe hesitated all at once, not wanting to press his advantage too far. Afraid that by

doing so he could alienate this one person who might be willing to take his side. “It was a tough situation, ya know. But I just felt like... Well ya know, somebody had to stand up and say something. Somebody had to put a stop to it.”

Gabe waited for his friend’s reply, hoping for an, “I’m with you,” or a, “That’s right.” But the only response he got was silence, the big guy staring off into the darkening distance once again. Thinking about what had just been said perhaps, or then again, maybe he was simply ignoring his Mate and hoping that he would go away. Though if that was the case, Gary was dealing with the wrong guy. He was dealing with a guy who knew nothing but pushing ahead and fighting for the things he believed in, and a guy who expected his friends to do the same.

“So tell me, where do you stand?” Gabe decided to lay it all on the line at last.

“Me?”

“Yeah, where do you stand on these types of things? On issues like harassment and gay rights and all the rest?”

“Well, I just...”

“And don’t give me that bullshit about, ‘I ain’t into politics,’ cause I know you’re a lot smarter than that. I know you have opinions about a lot of things, and I know you... I’ve seen the types of books you read.”

Gabe had noticed the book sitting on Gary’s bunk during their second day aboard, and when he had seen the title, he had hardly been able to believe his eyes. *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky! What the hell was a simple-minded guy like that doing reading a book like that? he had asked himself. It didn’t make any sense. And with his curiosity aroused, he had opened the guy’s locker only to find a whole pile of other books inside. Steinbeck and Graham Greene and Camus. Enough to fill half that little seabag he always carried around, and none of them the types of books that simpletons usually read. So then what did it all mean? What was going on with the guy? Was that simple-mindedness of his nothing but an act?

As Gabe re-asked those questions of himself now, he began to recall something else as well, something which he had vaguely noticed before about Gary’s grammar and his vocabulary. Because while the guy usually sounded like a half-educated dunce when he spoke, there were moments when his grammar would take a sort of quantum leap for the better. Moments when his speech would suddenly become that of someone with a lot more education, as though he had forgotten all at once to maintain those poor speech patterns of his, some distraction having caused him to drop what must have been a conscious effort to speak badly. A willful effort at self-uneducation. And if there was so much more going on in Gary’s head than he had ever let on, then he had to have an opinion about what had happened and the events which had led up to it. He had to be capable of taking a stand, the only question being what that stand would be. Which side of the conflict he would finally come out on.

Gary said little as Gabe peppered him with questions about political issues, though, acting not so much like he couldn’t answer them, but rather like he preferred not to. Like he didn’t want to get started down that road. And it was only after a long barrage that he finally

broke down and came out with a political opinion. Of sorts. An opinion which Gabe hadn't been expecting at all. "I kinda agree with what Albert Johnson says about..."

"Albert Johnson!?" What the hell was he talking about? Albert Johnson was some... What was he? Gabe knew very little about the guy, so little in fact that the only things he had ever read had been a couple of attacks upon him which had appeared in the underground press. A couple of hard-hitting critiques of the man and his ideas. Those ideas which consisted of... Wait a minute, what was he supposed to have said? Something about the imminent collapse of communism, right? Something about...? "That bourgeois economist who tried to misappropriate a whole group of ideas which he understood nothing about?" The old phrase came to him all at once.

"Johnson? Misappropriate a group of...?"

"Yes, all that talk about socialism collapsing under its own weight. How ridiculous! The very idea that class conflict could lead to the end of socialism rather than the end of capitalism. It's just... It's preposterous!"

"I don't know. I kinda..."

"The fall of socialism and the triumph of capitalism. How absurd! How..."

"No wait a minute! He never said anything about the triumph of capitalism." Suddenly Gary asserted himself in a way that he never had before.

And in the process he threw Gabe off his game. Gabe who knew far too little about the subject at hand to be able to counter an assertion like that. "He didn't? He...?"

"No, don't ya remember? He said that capitalism's in big trouble, too, cause there are so many things in it that don't add up that it's headin' for its own huge crisis one-a these days."

"He did?"

"Yeah, sure he did. Cause he says that the only way capitalism can balance out all its contradictions is through growth. Through fast growth like what we had a few years back. But now lately since things have started slowin' down and levelin' out, the whole thing's goin' to shit. And the worst part of it is that what we got now is nothin' but a sample-a what's comin' later."

"Yeah...?"

"Yeah, cause like with this bein' the real world that we live in and not the one that the economists imagine, there's no way we can keep growin' as fast as they want us to forever. And then once that slow growth and no growth settles in long-term, the only choice we're gonna have left is either we hang on and ride her to the bottom or else we make changes. Real changes. Stuff that's so big and so basic that the thing that survives in the end won't even be capitalism anymore. It'll be a whole other type-a free market system. That's what he says, anyway."

“Does he? Well...” Gabe didn’t like where the discussion was heading. He didn’t like talking about a subject with which he was so unfamiliar, the ideas contained in a book which he had never read. So he knew that what he had to do was to change directions. Change the subject as quickly as possible. “Well ya know, that’s not really what I was asking you about.”

“No? I thought you asked me...”

“No! What I wanted to know was what you think about... you know, about the big issues. Things like...” Suddenly the phrase came to him, that phrase which he had heard on the first day he met Gary. “Like I’m talking about taking charge of your life. You know what I mean?”

“Sure! Ya mean like... like freedom, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Freedom. Because where is Davy’s freedom in this whole thing? Where was his freedom when he was being harassed by those guys?”

“His freedom?” Gary didn’t seem to see the connection.

Not as clearly as Gabe did, in any case, since for him freedom and justice had always been synonyms. So that if ever there was an injustice taking place, then there was automatically a lack of freedom. “That’s right! His freedom from oppression. Where was Davy’s freedom to be gay if he wants to? His freedom not to have other people go around teasing him and harassing him for it.”

“Davy? Gay?” Gary was starting to sound dense once again.

“Yes, of course.”

“Shit, ya mean Davy’s a fag?”

“Please! We don’t use that word anymore.”

“How do ya know, man? Cause like he never come on to me.”

Gabe looked at his friend as best he could in the vague light, and he asked himself how it was possible for someone who had been around as much as Gary to have been around so little. “I don’t know for sure,” he began in an effort to move the conversation along. “But I sure as hell know that those other guys think he’s gay, and that’s why they’ve been harassing him.”

“By tellin’ fag-jokes?”

“I told you, we don’t use that word anymore.”

“But I mean, it was just jokes, ya know. It was just... They were just havin’ a little fun is all.”

“At Davy’s expense!!”

“Yeah...?” Something seemed to be sinking in with Gary at last, some awareness of the error of his ways—Gabe hoped—as from that point on he made no further attempt to defend what had taken place in the messroom that evening, but instead he stood listening to what Gabe had to say. Listening and learning.

And Gabe had a lot to teach him that night. All about Davy’s right to be free from harassment, his right to be gay or not as he saw fit, and his right not to be teased or ridiculed for it. His right to be himself, and in fact, the rights of everyone to be themselves, whether that meant being gay or black or a woman. Their right to be treated with equality and their right to have their humanity respected.

Gabe was on a serious roll by now, while Gary had almost nothing to say in reply. He wasn’t arguing, but he wasn’t looking away either, as instead he looked and listened. Looked into Gabe’s eyes with an expression that was hard to read in the near-total darkness on that deck. An expression which might have been that of a person who is slowly becoming convinced, or then again, it might have been a simple expression of politeness or even one of passive resistance. It was much too dark to tell. Especially in light of the one comment of his that stuck in Gabe’s mind afterwards. That moment when, as Gabe was repeating his list of all those whose rights have to be respected, Gary added a mildly sarcastic, “How bout a guy’s right to be a redneck?”

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A redneck such as the Billie-Joe pair who were evidently just as prepared to fight for what they thought was right as was Gabe. Ready to defend their own set of beliefs, their own ideas about the nature of freedom which were so much at odds with those of Gabe that if the group of them were ever to sit down and discuss the issue, it would have sounded like the conversation was taking place in two different languages. With Gabe talking about freedom from injustice and racism and sexism, while Billie-Joe would have talked about, Leave me alone! Let me say whatever the fuck I feel like saying. Let me insult the niggers and the kikes and the fags and anyone else I feel like insulting. Anyone who isn’t exactly like me. Let me do my thing!

And so given the huge differences in outlook which existed among the principal antagonists on board, it wasn’t long before the crew of the *Baroid Bullet* had become polarized into two opposing camps, something which became especially apparent at meal-times over the next few days. With the Billie-Joe pair sitting all the way down at the end of the table which had always been the Captain’s, while Gabe would sit at the opposite end of the benches, joined only by Gary, and while Davy would make every effort to stay inside the galley. The central object of the conflict doing his best to stay out of it.

Even Gary’s support seemed little more than half-hearted, though, as rather than sitting clear at the end of the bench like Gabe did, he would take a spot that shaded somewhat into the neutral zone. And then when it came to the conversation taking place at the table, while the big guy may have had little to say directly to those seated at the redneck end, still he could be seen smiling at their jokes on numerous occasions, sometimes even chuckling slightly. Giving the

impression that he actually found them funny, those jokes which came along one after another as though the rednecks were making a conscious effort to sound jolly and unaffected by the situation, Billie and Joe taking turns telling stupid jokes and all of them laughing together. All of them including Frank who seemed to enjoy himself as long as they didn't get into provocative or insulting subjects, though he would grow nervous and change the subject whenever they did so. Whenever the others would start making anti-Jewish or anti-gay comments, making them at such a volume as to leave no doubt as to their intended target.

Meanwhile down at the yankee end of the table, the two friends would have much less to say to each other. Because Gabe had no interest in competing with that group of ignorant assholes in a laughs-per-minute contest, while Gary seemed uncomfortable with the whole situation, as though personal conflict of that sort went against his easy-going nature. And in fact, a pained expression would come over his face whenever the rednecks went into their attack mode, the same look of deep-seated unease that appeared each time Gabe tried to retaliate. Answering their insults with loud talk about dumbass rednecks marrying their sisters and turning out new generations of inbred idiots, or in what proved to be an equally ineffective tactic, using his vocabulary against those uneducated morons. Insulting them in ways that none of them could understand, ways that left them no room to strike back other than through the use of tired old phrases like, "Goddamn commie." Or on one occasion, through Billie's comment that, "Ya know, Hitler had the right idea."

Considering the intensity of the hatred which was so quickly coming to permeate that ship and its living quarters, growing more palpable with each passing day, it was perhaps inevitable that sooner or later the conflict among them was going to become a physical one. Sooner or later they were going to come to blows. But while Gabe may have known in his heart that something was bound to happen eventually, still it took him by surprise when the first actual incident took place. Because the whole thing seemed to come right out of the blue.

It happened on a day when they were tied up to a rig, with the hose hooked up as they pumped away on a load of drilling-mud, and with Gabe pacing the deck as he awaited word from the Engineer on duty that the present tank was empty and it was time for them to switch to another. He was pacing back and forth, back and forth just behind the house, when suddenly he heard a loud metallic thump.

What the hell? he asked himself as he looked at the bulkhead nearby, focusing in on the spot from which the sound had come and finding signs there that a fresh chip had just been taken out of the paint and rust that covered it. A big chip. And then as he dropped his eyes toward the deck, he found a chunk of metal which he was sure hadn't been there a short time before.

What the hell? he asked once again as he picked the thing up and looked it over, a nasty-looking little chunk of steel with lots of jagged edges sticking out. Something that probably would have left him with a bad cut if it had hit him just now. If it... If it had hit him!!? What was he saying!? All at once, the whole thing was becoming clear in his mind: The fact that someone had just thrown that thing at him! And the adrenaline was starting to shoot through his veins as he looked around to see who that someone could have been.

Looked out at the empty deck behind the house where, despite the fact that there was no one in sight, he immediately knew exactly where the thrower had to be. He had to have gone through the door on the after end of one of the stacks and then down the ladder. He had to have gone into the engineroom since the only other option was for him to have jumped over the side. And so armed with that knowledge, Gabe clutched the little piece of steel firmly in his hand as he went stomping off in the direction of one of the stacks. Off to confront his would-be attacker, his fighting-juices flowing in a way that they hadn't flowed in years. Not since those demonstrations of years ago. The violent ones. The ones when he had known beforehand that things were going to turn violent, both sides spoiling for a fight at the time. Both sides ready to go at it in the same way that he was suddenly spoiling for a fight right now.

Gabe wasn't all that familiar with the engineroom, though, and so being wary of an ambush, he descended the ladder in the port stack slowly and carefully, looking around on all sides as he went. Though seeing no one anywhere in that part of the engineroom, he soon made his way forward toward where the pump for discharging the mud was located, dodging obstacles and approaching that pump only to find Joe seated before it with his back turned. The picture of innocence. Sitting there staring at the machinery as though he were completely unaware of the fact that anything had just happened. Or even of Gabe's presence.

"Hey you!" Gabe yelled as he came to a halt a few feet away, yelling loudly enough to be heard above the whining of the pump. But then rather than answer him, Joe acted as though he hadn't heard a thing, and he continued to feign deafness even as Gabe repeated his challenge in a louder voice a few seconds later. So seeing that there was no other way to put an end to the guy's play-acting and force a response, Gabe raised his hand and tossed the jagged little piece of steel at him, throwing it hard enough to vent some of the fury inside him. Hard enough to raise a bump as he bounced it off the back of Joe's head. Calling out at the same time in that fighting-voice of his, "Hey asshole!! Ya dropped this!"

Joe swung around all at once like he was about to attack, though in an instant he seemed to think better of the idea, settled back instead on the stool on which he sat. A dumbass redneck grin spreading across his face as he spoke up in a tone of phony innocence. "What ya doin' down here, Mate? Ya have a accident out there on deck?"

"Yeah! The same type-a accident that you're about to have in a minute."

"Me? Shit man, I didn't do nothin'." Joe obviously wasn't ready to fight, and he refused to react no matter what Gabe did to provoke him over the next few minutes. He refused to stand up and face his accuser no matter what names he was called, and even when Gabe reached out at one point and shoved him nearly off the stool, still he refused to take the bait. He refused to fight like a man, remaining seated instead as he smiled stupidly and denied everything, even the most obvious facts. Lied through his teeth, through that idiotic grin which covered his face.

Gabe was almost beside himself with anger by then, and what he wanted to do more than anything else was to reach out and rip that face right off the guy. He wanted to shred it into little pieces and pound it into mush, and if only the guy had given him some excuse for doing so. Just one little excuse! If only he had gotten up off that stool for a single second. If only... But no, that wasn't to be. Not with that guy, it wasn't. Not with that gutless wonder, that lowdown, lying pile

of southern shit. Oh, it was so frustrating! It was so bad that Gabe knew that he had to get out of there before he burst. He had to go somewhere to blow off steam and slam his fists into bulkheads. Though before he went, he wanted to leave that asshole with one last threat. One last serious, heartfelt statement of intent. “You ever try somethin’ like that again and you’re dead! And I don’t care what the fuck lies you try tellin’ about it. You’re dead!!”

Gabe didn’t feel very good about the way things had worked out as he left the engineroom. He felt almost like he had been made into a clown by that dirty little sneak-thief, sitting there smiling and lying and denying the whole thing. And refusing to fight. Refusing to take him on man-to-man, one-on-one and may the best man win. Refusing to stand up and...

Hey, you know what? That guy has to get up off his stool sooner or later, doesn’t he? He can’t stay in that engineroom forever. And when he tries to leave, that’s when I’m gonna get him. That’s when I’m gonna be waiting for him.

With that thought in mind, Gabe kept a close watch on the stacks as he resumed his pacing about the deck, doing so at a much more furious rate now than what he had before, and keeping an eye out for any attempt by Joe to sneak past him while at the same time watching for flying objects. But watch and wait as he might, still his longing for vengeance went unfulfilled, Joe’s only appearance on deck being the moment when he stuck his head just around the corner of the stack and yelled that it was time to switch tanks before retreating back to the safety of the engineroom as quickly as he could. Back to where Gabe couldn’t get at him.

And Gabe was boiling with anger as he went to get Gary to help him switch the hose over to another header. He was so enraged that it was impossible for him to contain himself, everything that he had to say about that lowlife coward and his sneak attack pouring out of his mouth in one long, extended rant. All the venom and the hatred and the facts of the case coming out mixed together in a big jumble of angry words.

When he finally paused to take a breath, though, stopped long enough to give Gary a chance to speak up and say, “Okay brother, I’m with you, let’s go get that asshole!” what did he hear? Did he hear that phrase or some other fighting words come out of the big guy’s mouth? Did he hear him declare war on that sneaky little asshole in the same way that Gabe already had? No!! The only thing he heard was, “Are ya sure?” said in a mild and unemotional tone. “Did ya see him throw it?”

“No, of course not. I already told you that. But I sure as hell felt the wind from it when it went by,” he pushed the truth a bit in the interest of justice, in the interest of persuading his friend to join him. “And Joe was the only guy out there.”

“Geez, I don’t know...”

“You don’t know? But I just told you, man!”

“Yeah I know, but it just don’t make any sense. It just...”

It didn’t take long for Gabe to realize that he was never going to convince the guy completely, not when he had no witnesses and hardly any physical evidence to show him. No

jagged piece of metal anymore, just a small dent in an already battered and beaten bulkhead, which was hardly enough to overcome what appeared to be deep-seated doubts. And if he couldn't get Gary to join him after such a blatant act of aggression as that, then he would have no choice but to take on the whole group of rednecks by himself. Joe and Billie and Frank, with no help from his so-called friend. He would have to fight this whole thing out one-man-against-the-world.

Oh, it was so discouraging, that lack of support from the one guy he had been counting on. Because he had already known better than to expect anything from Davy, always running and hiding like a scared little rabbit. But now to find that even Gary refused to commit himself? Even he refused to take sides? How it took the heart right out of him. How it drained him, left him so deeply disillusioned that when the opportunity for a real fight finally presented itself a short time later, he hadn't the strength to seize it. He hadn't the will to raise his fists and throw the first punch.

It happened when Billie arrived upon the scene, Billie who was clearly not the coward that Joe was. Walking past on his way to relieve his buddy in the engineroom before returning a short time later with fire in his eyes as he charged up and got right in Gabe's face. "What the fuck is this I hear ya been doin' to my man!?"

"Well, what the fuck's he tryin' to do to me!?"

"You leave him alone, ya hear me? And don't ever go near that engineroom again!"

"I go wherever the fuck I feel like goin'!"

"Not in that engineroom, ya don't! You stay the fuck outa there!!"

"And you stay the fuck offa this deck!!"

Around and around they went, never quite coming to blows though with neither of them showing signs of backing down. Both of them declaring openly that the war was now on. A fight to the death. A war of extermination.

But it was a war in which Gabe found himself completely alone, without a single ally thanks to Gary's desertion. And if he needed any further proof of his growing isolation aboard that ship, it was demonstrated to him in a graphic way when the group of them sat down to their next meal together, with all the rednecks sitting at their end of the table as usual, and with Gary taking a place along the bench that was now clearly in the neutral zone. At a spot which, while it may have been mere inches from his previous location, still held a huge symbolic significance in Gabe's eyes as it seemed to indicate the big guy's drift toward the other side. His abandonment of his friend and the ideals for which he was fighting, and perhaps even his sympathy for the opposing view. For the rednecks and their way of life. And Gary's silence throughout the meal only served as further proof of his refusal to take up the good fight. His embrace, or at least his tolerance, of evil. Because he failed to react in any way as the rednecks went on and on in a triumphal tone, Joe practically confessing his guilt outright at one point when he made a joke about "accidents" taking place out on deck. Coming right out and saying it while Gary did

nothing. While he stared at the food on his plate as though he hadn't heard a thing. Sat there like one gone deaf and blind.

And then a couple of days later, that was when Gary seemed to switch sides altogether. When he agreed to go out drinking with the rednecks as they went ashore to celebrate the nation's birthday at the only bar in town, the *Bullet* sitting idle at her lay berth at the time. They went out together, all of them. Billie and Joe and Frank and Gary, even Davy joining them later on. Davy! Even he went out to celebrate the Fourth of July with the others, so that in the end it was only Gabe who was left behind. Only he who was left to... To do what? To stand up for what he believed in? Or was it simply to pout? Or then again, was the real reason for his refusal to go the one that he heard from the mouth of one of the rednecks as they walked away? "Ah, them commies never wanta drink to the USA."

Whatever the real motive may have been, though, Gabe found himself truly alone that evening, in body as well as spirit. Without a friend in the world. And he was still alone even when Davy came back before the rest, entered the house and walked by without a word, nothing but a slight nod of the head. Alone as he closed the book he had been staring at and dragged himself off to his room at last, shut himself up inside long before the others made their appearance late that night. Loud and drunk. Stumbling around and shooting off their mouths.

Gabe could hear them outside his door as they came in, laughing and joking and saying stupid things, and he also heard it when the talk began to take on a darker tone a short time later. "Fuckin' commie." "Yeah, what the fuck's that guy doin' around here? This here's an American ship." "Yeah, and he's a fuckin' commie!" "We used to kill them motherfuckers over in Nam!" "Fuckin' rights! We oughta kill em all!!" "Motherfuckin' commies!!"

Gabe was immediately on edge as he heard those words, knowing all too well what was about to come next. And so determined to be ready for the attack when it came, he quietly got out of bed and looked around for a weapon. Searched without luck as he could find nothing in that stuffy little room. Nothing but the little pocketknife which he always carried around with him, that is, while the only other useful object in sight was the door which he just might be able to do something with. Might be able to turn it into a weapon if he were to play his cards right, he told himself as he crept over to stand behind it and wait there for the first asshole who tried to open it. His heart pounding all the while, though his head as clear as could be. Nervous but not scared as he stood ready to deal with whatever they might throw at him. Ready to react and ready to defend himself.

And as it turned out, he didn't have long to wait, Billie's voice soon moving over to where it came from just outside the door before dropping to a whisper, followed shortly by the turning of the knob. The door slowly beginning to open as Gabe stood waiting behind it. Slowly as though the guy thought he could still sneak up. Opening it a little bit and a little bit more and a little bit more. Until suddenly Gabe leaped into action. Raised his leg and shoved the door shut with all his strength, thumping and crunching human flesh as it went.

"Ow! What the fuck!!" Billie screamed in pain. "My fuckin' fingers! My fuckin' fingers!"

Okay now, what's next? Gabe asked himself as he raised the pocketknife to the ready and moved out of the way of the door, knowing that the same trick wouldn't work a second time and not wanting to fall victim to it in reverse. But then before a second attack could be mounted, he began to hear other voices speak up. Calmer and less confrontational voices. The Captain saying, "Come on now, that's enough-a that stuff!" and Gary saying in an almost casual tone, "Hey man, wrong room. That one's yours over there."

Everyone was hung-over the next morning when the time came for them to get back to work. Everyone but Gabe and Gary whose resistance to alcohol and hangover seemed to be in direct proportion to his size. And when it came to the two principal rednecks aboard, they looked especially miserable that day, barely dragging themselves through the work as they had to shift the ship early in the morning and pick up a deck-cargo at one of the commercial docks before heading out to a rig. And they were still sickly and grumpy when lunchtime rolled around, the Captain up on the bridge piloting the ship out and waiting for Gary to eat first before coming up to relieve him, while the Billie-Joe pair stumbled into the messroom with looks on their faces like they weren't sure that they would be able to keep the meal down. Bloodshot eyes and bleary expressions.

When Gabe saw those two guys looking the way they did, he knew that he had to rub it in somehow, the opportunity much too tempting for him to pass up. The opportunity to take a shot at those guys who had so repeatedly insulted him and tried to humiliate him, even turned his friend against him. So that now he just had to say something back. He had to. And when he noticed the rag that Billie had wrapped around his left hand, suddenly he knew exactly what to say, the perfect redneck-style joke that would get under those guys' skins in a way that nothing he had ever said had managed to do. And so looking at Gary in a casual way, he spoke all at once in a loud voice for everyone to hear. "Hey, did I ever tell you about this guy I know? They call him Three-Finger Billie, and he's so fuckin' stupid that he can't keep his fingers outa slammin' doors, so he's only got..."

Billie was on him before he could finish, throwing him to the deck and hammering away before he even knew what hit him. Punching and pounding as Joe rushed over to kick him while he writhed and struggled and tried to fight back. "Hey stop!" the only help from Gary as Gabe tried to throw Billie off him. Tried to get up or to fend off the blows that were raining down upon him, punch after kick after punch. Tried to strike back at whatever he could within that blur of fists and feet and pain as he lay pinned to the ground. Billie's punches and Joe's kicks. Until suddenly Billie seemed to go flying off, lifted into the air by Gary as he came to the rescue at last. Joe beating a hasty retreat once he saw that he faced a one-on-one.

Gabe quickly rose to his feet and began to advance upon Billie who stood locked in the grasp of the big man, his arms pinned behind him. "Let him go!" he ordered his AB in his firmest voice of authority, ready to let the guy have it for real.

"Lemme go! Lemme at him!" Billie yelled at the same time.

Though despite those orders from his shipboard superiors, Gary refused to budge. He held Billie in a grip so powerful that the guy couldn't break free, and he made it clear with his body-language that he wasn't going to allow Gabe to attack him, either. "Calm down, you guys.

The fight's over," he said once, twice, three times, trying to smooth things over though without success. Without putting an end to anything.

Because while Gabe stopped and stood in silence with clenched fists, directing all his energy into a hard, steady stare, Billie was venting for all he was worth, screaming and cursing at Jews and commies and anyone else he could think of. Until suddenly after minutes of that indiscriminate rage, his words took an abrupt turn in the direction of the big guy who held him. "Lemme go, ya fuckin' asshole. You lemme go or you're dead!"

"Ah, come on now..."

"I mean it! You're dead!! I'm gonna get ya!" Billie yelled and ranted, threatening and cajoling and saying whatever came into his head as he called the guy every name he could think of, from a traitor to a commie to a whole series of profanities. And it was only when he seemed to run out of fresh new insults that all at once he fell silent, said not a word for several seconds. Ceased his struggle to free himself as well, until at last he spoke up in a calmer voice with a single question directed at the big man. A clear and concise question. "So tell me, who the fuck's side are you on, anyway?"

"Me? I'm not on anyone's side."

"Oh yes ya are!! You're on one side or you're on the other. Cause there ain't no middle around here no more!"

"I told ya I ain't on no side..."

"Ya sure as fuck are!"

Billie refused to give up. He repeated his question again and again, and he refused to let the matter drop despite Gary's efforts to dodge it. He insisted that the big guy had to choose a side even as he stood prisoner in the man's iron grip, refusing to accept any statements of neutrality and refusing to let the guy change the subject on him no matter how hard he tried. But instead Billie pushed the issue and pushed it some more as Gabe stood watching with his own interest highly aroused as well. His own desire to see his friend come clean at last and tell them where he stood. So that while Gary may have resisted and done his best to avoid answering, there finally came a moment when he seemed to shrug his shoulders as though admitting to himself that he had no choice but to say something one way or the other, the middle ground having disappeared so completely, so utterly, that he would have to pick a side whether he wanted to or not. He would have to take a stand. And so letting go of Billie with one hand, he pointed over at Gabe and said in a solemn tone, "Only thing I can tell ya is that I ain't ever gonna be against him. That's the only thing."

At which Billie spun around in the loosened grip and looked him straight in the eye. "Then you're against *me*!"

A smile came over Gabe's face as he heard those words, the big guy committing himself to the struggle at last, and he had an urge to gloat as he watched Billie shake his other arm loose and go stomping off in anger, followed closely by Joe. He had an urge to dance and shout in that

moment of triumph, an urge to embrace Gary and to thank him, to welcome him into the fold. Though before he could say or do a thing, his friend suddenly turned and cleared his plate from the table and walked off, saying that he had to go relieve the Captain on the bridge, and leaving Gabe all alone. Virtually alone in that now nearly deserted messroom, with only the highly reticent Davy still in sight. No one there that he could talk to and share his thoughts and feelings with. No one but himself, that is, as he quickly came to see. His own image in the mirror.

And so Gabe was soon making his way into the head to clean off the blood and check on his condition—and to discuss the matter with himself. To stand there and stare into his own eyes while speaking in silence about everything that was on his mind. The joy, the optimism, the growing belief in himself and his cause. Until finally he just had to come right out and say it aloud. “Ya know, a bloody nose is a small price to pay for a victory like that.” Because not only had he gotten all the way under that asshole’s skin for the first time ever, but on top of that he had heard those words from Gary. He had heard his friend say that now he was on the side of the good guys and that was it, there was no going back. That from here on out, the two of them were in this thing together. And how sweet was that? How could it possibly have gotten better?

Oh, he felt fantastic! After-effects of that minor beating aside. In a state of near-euphoria that seemed to grow by the second. Almost too big for that cramped little room as it grew and grew. Almost too... Until all at once his one-man-conversation was interrupted by the sound of Gary’s voice outside, calling to one and all to inform them that the Captain wanted to see them on the bridge. All of them, and he wanted to see them now. Or in other words, what the guy was saying was that no sooner had he reached the bridge to relieve the watch than he had spilled the whole thing. He had told the Captain about the fight which had just taken place.

And Frank was in a dead-serious mood as the crew squeezed into that little wheelhouse of theirs, crowding together though with one side in the dispute doing its best to avoid body- and eye-contact with the other. His face wore an expression unlike anything that Gabe had seen before, a look that contained none of the comical ineptitude that usually appeared there, none of the stupidity and nothing of the clown. But instead what Gabe saw as he gazed upon that face was the look of a man in command, and if only he hadn’t known better, he might have been tempted to respect the guy a little bit at that moment. He might even have looked up to him. Slightly. And then when Frank opened his mouth to speak, the voice that came out had a timbre of authority unlike anything that Gabe would have thought possible. Demanding an explanation. Demanding to know what exactly had happened.

Billie was the first to answer, shrugging the whole thing off. “Ah, it’s okay, Frank. It was just a friendly little fight.”

“Well there ain’t gonna be no fights on this ship, friendly or otherwise. Ya hear me? None!!”

That sharp rebuke from their leader shut Billie-Joe up in an instant, wiped the “innocent” smiles right off their faces. And since no one else seemed willing to volunteer any more information after that, Frank soon turned to Davy and asked him directly, he being the closest thing to a neutral party in the affair. Davy who did his best to dodge the question, however, mumbling out something about having seen nothing and knowing nothing, about having been too

busy in the galley to have seen who had done what to whom. Giving a non-reply which was so clearly unsatisfactory to Frank that he spent the next several seconds glancing over the faces of all those present. Billie-Joe and Gabe, until finally he turned to Gary for information. Turned to the one person there who seemed too naïve and innocent to lie.

“Well, it’s like I was tellin’ ya before. Them two Engineers went and jumped on the Mate, and they...”

“Bullshit!” Billie spit out.

As Joe began to whine, “He was sayin’ all this shit about us...”

“I don’t care what the fuck anybody said!” Frank cut them off before things could go any further. “Cause there’s never an excuse for fightin’ on here. None! And I won’t have none-a that on my ship. D’ya hear me? No fightin’ and no pickin’ fights and no nothin’ else. No insults and no jokes and no talkin’ about each other. There’s just gonna be... You guys’re gonna behave yourselves or else you’re outa here. Ya hear that? You’re fired and you’re never gonna work for this company again. I’ll see to that! You’re outa here, and I’ll sail shorthanded if I have to. Cause there’s not gonna be any more fightin’ around here. It’s over with! Finished!!”

Gabe didn’t know how to react to a pronouncement like that. He didn’t know if he should jump up and say, “Okay, go ahead and fire me,” and get the hell out of there once and for all. And if he hadn’t been aware of the fact that in doing so he would have been handing a victory to Billie, he might have given the idea some serious consideration. Though as it was, he knew that he would have to stick it out and see this thing through. He would have to stay aboard the old *Bullet* and wait for Billie’s next move. His inevitable next move.

Because Gabe was sure that there would be another move coming sooner or later. He knew it because he knew the man. He knew that Billie hadn’t learned a damned thing from what the Captain had said. It had been all too obvious from the bemused look which had covered that stupid, white-trash face of his as he listened. And it had been even more obvious from the wink he gave to Frank as he filed past at the end of the session. A wink which was answered with a frown.

Whatever the guy’s thoughts may have been, though, whatever the feelings of each of those involved, the struggle taking place aboard the *Baroid Bullet* was to enter into a new and indecisive phase after that day. To become less a situation of open warfare and more a sort of daily grind, a war of nerves and stamina in which each side did its best to wear its opponents down through small acts of defiance. Through dirty looks and aggressive moves to defend territory whenever it appeared threatened, and through insults spoken “among themselves” by Billie-Joe or by Gabe—though never by Gary.

The rednecks still sat together at their end of the table during mealtimes, but the conversations which took place among them were very subdued whenever Frank was around, consisting mainly of talk about hunting and fishing, along with the occasional joke. Innocuous and completely inoffensive jokes. And then at those times when Frank was gone and only Billie-Joe were there, Gary seemed to take it upon himself to become the enforcer of the Captain’s will, going over and snatching away their plates whenever the two of them got started on the insults

and provocations. Grabbing the plates off the table and then growling out, “Lunch is over for you,” or something similar. And saying it with such authority that neither of the two smaller men ever had the guts to fight back, whining a bit instead before slinking off to their room or the engineroom.

With the atmosphere being so strained at mealtimes, so cold in spite of the suffocating heat inside the messroom, that part of the ship soon became a sort of no-man’s-land, a place where no one hung out during their free time anymore. No one but the Captain, that is, since he would sometimes make it a point to sit around in that room by himself, evidently for no other reason than to prove that he still could. That he was still the Captain and this was still his ship and he could sit wherever he wanted to, and if none of the others cared to join him, then that was their problem. It wasn’t his fault that they chose not to.

Because when it came to a social life aboard that ship, there was none any longer. It had splintered so badly that the only gatherings taking place at any time other than mealtimes were those that involved two people, Billie-Joe hanging out in some obscure corner somewhere while Gabe and Gary would do the same somewhere else, and while Davy would generally have the entire galley and messroom area to himself. Wandering freely through that largest indoor space on the ship, whistling sometimes and with a look of happiness and contentment on his face that Gabe hadn’t seen since before the problems began. Gabe caught him at it a few times when he entered the messroom unannounced, though it was only for the guy to clam right up once he saw that he was no longer alone. And the only times that Davy ever failed to cover up his feelings were on those occasions when Gabe found him in the presence of Gary, the two of them hanging out and talking away like old and trusted friends. Though the moment he would approach them and try to join the conversation himself, Davy would come up with some excuse to break it off and walk away.

When it came to the relations between Gabe and Billie, the two principals in the struggle taking place aboard that ship, the next week or so proved to be one long game of stares and dares, each of them watching the other whenever they were in the same vicinity at the same time. Each of them ready to pounce if the other happened to cross the invisible line which they had established between them. Billie watching Gabe whenever he was out on deck to make sure that he stayed clear of the entrances to *his* engineroom, while Gabe would watch to make sure that Billie didn’t linger too long out on *his* deck. That he only went out there when it was along the lines of business, and that he always went directly to where he was going, without detours and without stopovers.

And so with the two main players keeping such close tabs on each other during those seemingly endless days of waiting, the only incidents that took place were those involving the secondary players. With Gary having to chase sneaky Joe away from the various locations where he would find him lurking during the day or night, and with Joe making jokes and other veiled threats about “accidents”—when he wasn’t busy trying to provoke them. Throwing things or dropping them, though with the most notable characteristic of this new round of “accidents” being the fact that they always targeted Gary, Joe evidently having learned his lesson from the one attempt he had made against Gabe. Learned that it was better to target someone who was not only more vulnerable and less on-his-guard, but also someone who wouldn’t take his reprisals to

such an extreme in case the “accident” were to fail. Someone who wouldn’t turn it into the sort of life-and-death situation that Gabe surely would.

There was at least one day when Gary was on his guard, however. A day when he had to go down and clean the liquid-mud tank in which they occasionally carried cargoes, preparing it for a new cargo which was incompatible with the previous one. Because while it was something that he had done a couple of times before, going down with a firehose to clean out every nook and cranny of that tank while getting completely soaked in the process, those earlier cleanings had been performed at times when he was on better terms with the engineers. Billie even joking with him as he entered the tank the first time, “If I hear ya bouncin’ offa the bulkheads, I’ll turn down the pressure.” On this occasion, though, there was to be no joking. Just a solemn, “Watch my back,” from Gary to Gabe before he started down. A request which Gabe took very seriously, knowing how vulnerable his big friend would be, so that throughout the operation he watched every move that Billie-Joe made. Every move, every single move.

Watched as he should have been doing on that other day when the most serious “accident” of all nearly took place. Watched as he would have been doing had he not been so far from the action, alone on the bow by the anchor-windlass while the others were on the stern. That day when as they were leaving a rig after having discharged their cargo, with the big guy untying one of the lines from the rig while Joe stood behind him, hooking the tag-line attached to the end of the hawser onto the hook from the crane, the little sneak-thief began to loop the line around in such a way as to put Gary into the bight. Wrapping the line around him so that it would hit him, maybe even take him with it once the big, heavy hawser started to run out. And Joe might have succeeded with that plan of his, too, if the Captain hadn’t noticed what was going on and stepped out of the wheelhouse to yell a warning to Gary, doing so just in time for the big guy to jump clear. To get out of the way of that hawser before starting out after Joe who immediately turned and fled toward the safety of the engineroom as fast as his legs could carry him. Ran so fast that Gary was forced to give up the chase after only a step or two, and to let the guy get away with what he had just tried to do. Let him get away as he always seemed to do. Because not only did Joe get away with that “accident” at the time, but he did so later on as well since Gary appeared to hold no grudge. Said not a word about it the next time that the two of them met. Not a word as though the whole thing were already forgotten.

And things might never have gone any further than that, all those near misses quickly brushed aside and those endless rounds of dirty looks, had it not been for an event which took place aboard that ship one day out of sheer coincidence. One of those strange coincidences that sometimes come along in life. Or to tell the truth, the coincidence which occurred that day wasn’t a particularly strange one at all. No, it was one of those things that happen every day in places where people live in such close proximity to one another as they did on that ship, and the only reason that it came to hold any special significance was because of the fact that it involved the two main players in the struggle taking place aboard the *Baroid Bullet*.

It happened on a day when the ship sat idle at its so-called lay berth, with several of the crewmembers ashore for one reason or another, the Captain and Joe having gone off together to who-knows-where, while Gary had gone out for a walk around town to get a little exercise. And he was doing so alone since Gabe had turned down his offer to come along, having sworn to himself some time back that he would never again set foot in that half-assed little town where

they were stationed, never have anything more to do with it. Not until the day finally arrived for him to leave that ship and that town—and that whole region of the country—forever.

So Gabe was by himself that day, reading and passing the time and eventually going out on deck for some exercise of his own. Going out to walk a few laps around *his* deck. But then it was just as he was on his way back into the house, just as he was reaching out for the dog on the watertight door that would take him inside, that suddenly he saw the dog flip up on its own and the door start to swing open. So that the next thing he knew, Gabe found himself standing face-to-face with that living symbol of all that is wrong with the world, that embodiment of all that is evil in the human race. He found himself standing directly in front of Billie!

Each of them stood blocking the doorway from his own side at about an arm's length away, and since this was the first time that the two of them had been in such close proximity since the day of the fight, Gabe had no idea how to react. He didn't know if he should shove his way through or freeze on the spot or turn and walk away. Asking himself what to do, what to say, until all at once Billie made the decision for him.

"Get outa my way, boy," he drawled out in his most offensive white-trash tone. And no sooner had Gabe heard those words than he knew that there could be no backing down. He knew that he had a fight on his hands, and a fight which he had better win.

It was stupid, though, and he knew it. It was childish, two grown men behaving in that way. But what else could he do when he was being so openly challenged? He couldn't let that asshole go through the doorway ahead of him, could he? Not when it would be seen as a defeat. And what that meant was that he had no choice in the matter. He had to fight his way through from where he stood, and he had to win. He had to get through that doorway first!

Gabe took a half-step forward, right up to the lip at the bottom of the doorway, only to have Billie reach out in an effort to hold him back, grabbing on and pushing back from the inside as Gabe pushed harder from without. Harder and harder, fighting and shoving to force his way through. And soon he was putting his shoulder down as the other guy did the same, both of them pushing ahead with all their might. Struggling to prevail in this test of wills. This contest among titans. This... This... This idiotic display of childish petulance.

Gabe could hardly believe his own stupidity as he fought to get through that doorway. Asking what the hell he had gotten himself into, while at the same time wondering how he would ever be able to get back out of it. Because it soon became clear that Billie was much too strong for him to win in a straight-ahead push. And with his legs and back quickly growing tired from the futile effort to out-muscle the guy, he tried to come up with some alternative. Some new plan. Because he couldn't lose this fight. He couldn't lose it!

But what else could he do? How could he...? Aha!! Suddenly he knew. So that twisting his body to break the guy's grip, he took a quick step to one side and then left the foot-high door-lip to do the rest. Billie's body lurching forward all at once, flying through the doorway with his arms flailing as his feet refused to follow. Couldn't follow. With nothing to stop him now, nothing to help as he went diving head-first. Diving and diving until... Splat! He landed flat on his face on the deck outside the door. Defeated and prostrate before the victorious Gabe.

“Have a nice trip there, Three-Finger?” Gabe just had to rub it in, had to toss out one final insult as he continued on his way. Stepping over and around, and laughing out loud as he went.

And Gabe was still laughing to himself as he stretched out on his bed and started to read. Or rather as he tried to read, staring at the book in front of him while his mind was somewhere else, replaying the events of his recent encounter again and again and paying almost no attention to the words on the page. Something that didn’t particularly matter anyway since the book was such a waste of time, some dumbass analysis of current events by some dumbass who had no idea what he was talking about, as is usually the case with books of that sort. And he had been going through the motions for quite some time, reading without the least comprehension, when suddenly he was interrupted by a knock at the door which he had closed earlier as a precaution.

“Come in,” he called out as he reached over to get hold of the steel rod which he always kept by his bed these days. Kept it on the side against the bulkhead where a prowler wouldn’t be able to grab it and use it against him. And then as he watched the door swing open, he was surprised to see that it was Davy.

Davy who hadn’t spoken a word to him in a week, two weeks, but who now entered the room as stealthily as he could, came over to the bed where he whispered in a fast, nervous voice, “You’ve gotta get outa here.”

“What? I what...?”

“Shhh!! Not so loud or he’ll hear ya. Cause I don’t want him to know.”

“What is it?” Gabe whispered back.

“It’s Billie. He’s gone crazy! I don’t know why, but he’s comin’ after ya. He’s... He’s got a gun, and he’s comin’ after ya!”

“Me? Now?”

“Yeah, he just said somethin’ to me about a killing. He says I’m gonna see me a killing, and then he said that... Man, you’ve gotta get outa here cause he’s got a gun. I know he does.”

“Well, let him come,” Gabe heard himself say with a bravado which may even have been real. And one that only increased as Davy pleaded with him several more times to get out of there while he still could, repeated the warning about the gun despite the fact that it was so obviously falling upon deaf ears. Because rather than deter him, that warning served only to make Gabe feel more determined than ever to stand his ground each time that he heard it, some strange, almost masochistic urge rising up steadily within him. The martyr-impulse of the true activist which was coming on stronger and stronger with each repetition of those words. Killing, danger, gun. Words that held no subtext of fear for a man like Gabe who was ready to die for what he believed in. A man who had always been ready to give his life for some cause, something greater than himself. And if that moment had arrived at last, then so be it. It was a good day to die.

Davy soon gave up and fled the room before Billie could come in and catch him there, fled the whole ship, evidently, as Gabe heard the door leading to the deck open and close. And then as he looked about to survey his situation, suddenly it dawned upon him just how alone he was right then, truly alone for the first time in years. The first time ever! Nervous all at once but oh, so alert at the same time, so aware of things which he had never seen before, never felt. The blood pulsing through his veins, the air entering and leaving his lungs. And as all the while his thoughts came to him with a clarity such as he had never known. Rushing past at a tremendous rate, though still they were lucid each and every one of them. Sharper and more focused than anything he had ever experienced.

And the main thing that his thoughts were telling him right then was that he had to do something. He had to get out of that room. Because while he may have been ready to die that day, he was also ready to fight, ready to win another round, even to kill if he had to. And if he wanted to come out of this thing on top, then he couldn't just sit there where he was and wait for the guy to make his move, but instead he would have to take the fight to him. He would have to take the initiative somehow. And so with the steel rod in one hand and the other hand ready to reach for his pocketknife if needed, soon he was starting toward the door, leaving his shoes behind so as not to make noise. Peeking his head out through the doorway where he saw that the door to the other room—Billie's room—was still closed.

Good, Gabe said to himself as he snuck outside and gently closed the door behind him, trying to leave the impression that he was still inside. But then as he looked around the galley and messroom area, he didn't see a single place where he could hide and wait for Billie. Under the table, in the little nook outside the head, everything was much too exposed to offer any sort of cover. Everything but perhaps that one corner way over there by the refrigerator, he thought all at once. Past the door to the Engineers' room and inside the galley, which was where he soon crept on tiptoes, hoping that Billie wouldn't hear him go by. And then once he had crammed himself into the little gap between the refrigerator and the bulkhead, he settled in to wait for the bad guy's next move. For his own chance to jump out and get him.

He waited there and waited, one minute, two minutes, until at last he saw Billie's head come sticking out the door to look around on all sides. Evidently not seeing him in the dark corner where he hid as the next thing the guy did was to sneak over toward the door to the deckies' room. Creeping along as quietly as he could before turning to face the door. With something in his right hand, Gabe could see it now from where he watched, something small and metallic. Not the big old revolver that he would have expected from that cowboy wannabe, but instead it was a little bitty thing. Some small-caliber pocket gun, evidently. Something so small that it would almost be an insult to be killed by it.

Billie reached out with his left hand and turned the knob slowly, ever so slowly, before suddenly he shoved his way into the room with all his might, not repeating the mistake of his previous assault upon that room. But then as he found that there was no one inside, soon he was on his way back out. And the moment Gabe saw the guy's head reappear through the doorway, he slid his own head all the way back into the corner, back to where it would be out of sight even as the guy looked things over more thoroughly this time around. Even as he began a slow and methodical search for his missing prey. But the problem, as Gabe soon came to realize, was that with his head as far back in the corner as he had it now, he wasn't able to see a damned thing. He

was as much in the dark about what was happening as Billie was. Or even more so since all he could do from that little corner of his was to listen for the guy's footsteps as he crept around the room, trying to hear what he could above the beating of his own heart.

Where is he going? he asked himself. Is he checking the head? Is he coming this way? Gabe could hardly stand the suspense. And with his heart pounding in his chest, his ears, he soon began to ask himself an even more pertinent question. Ask how he would know that the guy was within range once he got over to that part of the room. How he would know that it was time to jump out and attack now that he had gotten himself stuck in that corner. Blind and trapped and outgunned. How will I know? he asked himself again and again as the seconds crept by like minutes. Hours.

Asked though never answered since Billie was still some distance away when he heard the door from the deck open and close all at once. The next clear sound that of Gary's voice. "What's goin' on around here?"

"You better get the hell outa here!" Billie's voice was strained and deadly serious. "My fight ain't with you, and I don't wanta kill ya."

"Kill me? You ain't gonna kill nobody."

"Oh yes, I am. And if I gotta go through you to get to that asshole friend-a yours, then that's where I'm goin'."

"Well then I guess ya better get started, cause that's the only way you're gettin' to him is through me. And I ain't movin'!"

Gabe had to see what was going on. He couldn't hide in that corner like a coward any longer, hide while his friend did all the fighting for him. So he began to ease his head out until he caught sight of the two men, first Gary standing in profile in the middle of the room, and then a few steps in front of him, he saw Billie pointing his little popgun at the big guy who stood his ground unarmed. Stood square-shouldered and even took a small step forward.

"I'm warnin' ya! I don't wanta kill ya, but I will." Billie's nerves were completely rattled. "You stop right there!!"

Gabe had to do something! He had to get into this fight, though he didn't know how. Because he couldn't go charging all the way over there from where he was, not when it would give the guy enough time to squeeze off two or three shots before he could reach him. And if he couldn't use the direct approach, then what else could he do? Should he try throwing the rod at the guy? Or should he try to take advantage of the fact that Billie hadn't noticed him yet? That from the angle at which he was standing, it might be possible to sneak around in back of him without being seen.

No sooner had the idea come to Gabe than he was on his way, crouching low and creeping out of his corner as quietly as he could go. Angling off to his left as he circled around toward a spot where he would be able to jump the guy from behind. Two steps. Three steps.

Suddenly Billie saw him! Turning to face him while raising that little gun and pointing it. And Gabe was jumping up to run, he knew not where. And Gary was springing forward at the same instant, grabbing at the gun arm and pulling it away. And then, Bam! The gun was going off. And ping-ping-ping-ping, the bullet was flying around the room like a pinball. And, “Oh shit!” Billie was being hit by his own bullet, though not until after it was too spent to break the skin.

Gary had Billie down on the deck in an instant, pulling the gun from his hand and tossing it across the room as Gabe went charging up, ready to work the guy over with his steel rod had Gary not reached out so quickly to ward him off. “It’s all over with!” he yelled with an authority in his voice that belied his status as the lowest ranking person in that room, and soon he was taking charge of the entire situation. “You leave him alone,” he ordered Gabe before turning to Billie. “And you get the fuck outa here! You go pack your bags and get offa this ship right now. And don’t you ever come back!”

“You asshole! You fuckin’ piece-a shit!!” Gabe halted where he was and tore into the guy in the only way that he could, raining abuse upon him as he lay in the big man’s grasp. Cursing and calling him names and letting out all the anger and the fear and the other pent-up emotions of those weeks of tension. Anxiety. But then when Gabe paused for a moment to catch his breath, suddenly he felt spent and unable to go on. Without the strength to resume his attack, without the desire. Not to yell or to scream or even to whisper. Unable to utter a single word as he stood frozen in place, watching his enemy of the last few weeks get up and disappear from his life forever. Unable even to smile.

And apparently Billie was beyond speech by that time as well, as he picked himself up off the deck in silence and meekly did as he had been told, all the fight gone out of him. He went to his room and packed his belongings while Gary looked on, and then he took his bags and headed for the door with his head hung in disgrace, his eyes pointing nowhere but the ground. And the only time that he looked up was when he glanced back for a moment as he stepped through the exterior doorway for the last time. Glanced back to flip the bird to one and all.

That final gesture made no impression upon Gabe when he saw it, though. Gave him no urge to glower, no urge to gloat. But instead as he felt the adrenaline draining ever more completely from his system, Gabe found that he was left with nothing inside him anymore. Nothing at all. He was left with a strange, empty feeling as though the whole thing had been a waste of time somehow. All that struggle and passion which had come down to nothing in the end. To what appeared to be such an empty victory, perhaps even a tainted one. And it wasn’t just the way in which things had played themselves out just now that was bothering him, his own less-than-heroic role in the recent battle. No, it was more than that. It was a whole lot more.

Because in a way it was the ending itself that was bothering him now, as he soon began to realize. It was the fact that after the events of today, this whole thing was over with. All the stress and the strain and the nervous energy. It was finished and from here on out there would be no more struggle taking place aboard the *Baroid Bullet*. No more cause to which he could dedicate himself, as instead life on that ship was about to return to the boring sameness of his first days aboard. The boring sameness of his entire life over the last few years, it seemed.

Because without a struggle, what did he have to live for? Without a cause, what reason did he have even to get out of bed in the morning?

Gabe felt lost as he surveyed the coming days with foreboding. He felt totally lost, his spirits so low that he had nothing to say to anyone for the rest of the day, not to Gary or to Davy, and not to Frank either, when he and Joe returned to the ship an hour later. He couldn't bring himself to say a word beyond hello, so that it was left to Gary to explain the events of that day to their Captain. Left to him to tell the story of the gun as he handed it over for safekeeping, and of the bullet which had so recently flown around that room, and of Billie's departure, giving a rather strange version of events in the process, however. One in which his own role was somehow minimized so that Gabe was made to appear as the hero of the story.

And then it was after having listened to that weirdly distorted description of events and of the role which he had played, after Gary had finished speaking, as the Captain turned to address him. That was when Gabe found himself at an even greater loss for words, if such a thing is possible. Completely incapable of responding when Frank patted him on the shoulder and said, "I tell ya what, ya did the right thing there, Mr. Mate. I'm glad ya went and fired him," spoken in a voice of utter sincerity. "And I'm glad he missed ya with that bullet, too."

AND PEACE

With Billie's defeat and departure, peace returned to the *Baroid Bullet* at last. Joe kept such a low profile over the next couple of days that he was hardly seen at all before the reliefs showed up for him and his former colleague, evidently having been sent at the urgent request of the Captain. And in the case of the two new Engineers, Don and another guy named Joe, while they may have appeared at first glance to be another pair of typical southern rednecks, they soon proved to be rednecks more in the mould of Frank than that of Billie. Rednecks who had some amount of brains and even a little class. And perhaps it was at the Captain's urging that they quickly set out to establish good relations with the two yankees in their midst. They became especially friendly with Gary in a short period of time, and they also talked to Gabe whenever the opportunity arose. Not that he had anything to say to them, you understand, but at least he appreciated their efforts to get along.

And as for Davy, he seemed to come out of his shell the moment Billie was gone, emerging even more fully once the original Joe had left as well. He began to talk to everyone on board, the Captain and the new arrivals and Gary. Of course! And while he talked to Gabe from time to time, he never did so with the same affection that he showed toward Gary, not even with the same openness that he had shown back before all the trouble began. But instead there seemed to be some obstacle between the two of them now, some lack of trust on Davy's part, Gabe thought it might be. Or then again, maybe it was a lack of gratitude, a lack of appreciation for all that Gabe had risked and all that he had done for him.

Because Davy never said a word of thanks, not even when his relief showed up a few days later, some greasy-spoon artist named Tony. He said nothing to Gabe other than goodbye. Not that Gabe expected any thanks, mind you. Not that he felt the guy owed him anything, but it

was just that... I mean, he kissed Gary on both cheeks as he said goodbye, and he gave him his address and told him to look him up if he was ever in New Orleans. But then with Gabe, it was just... Nothing. It was just goodbye.

The days seemed to tick by even more slowly once Davy was gone. They seemed to become endless, a labor of Sisyphus. Out to the rigs and back, out and back. And the only thing that Gabe could think about during those long, slow days was how badly he wanted to get out of there. How badly he wanted to return to the Lakes and never see the Gulf again.

Though did he have to go there alone? he began to ask himself. The idea had been floating around in the back of his mind for some time, and as he knew that his ordeal aboard the *Bullet* would have to come to an end someday soon, he felt a growing urge to convince Gary to come along with him when he left for the north. As though in bringing the big guy along, Gabe would somehow be salvaging something from those days which otherwise appeared to have been such a waste. He would be accomplishing some small thing, he told himself, recruiting the guy to the cause and making it possible to finish his education. And that's not to mention the fact that he would also be proving to himself that he had come out of this thing with some semblance of dignity. That while he may have wallowed in the lowest filth of nautical existence during his days in the south, he hadn't been affected by it, but instead he was still the same person that he had always been. He was still Gabe the fighter. Gabe the revolutionary. Whenever he tried to bring up the subject with Gary, though, the guy always seemed to find some way to avoid answering, some way to change the subject or some excuse for walking away, so that to all appearances, Gabe was going to be heading north by himself when the time came. Back home with nothing to show for all those wasted days and weeks.

Or at least that was what he thought would happen, until their final night aboard. That night when they knew that they were making their final trip to a rig at last, word having come down a day or two earlier that they would have reliefs waiting for them the next day. Reliefs for all three of the deckies, Gabe and Gary and the Captain, too. And what that meant was that everything they were doing that day and night was for the last time ever. Ever! Loading up and heading out to a rig in the morning, hooking up hoses and pumping out mud before unhooking them and casting off in the evening. Starting back at last. And while Gabe felt no nostalgia whatsoever for the *Bullet* or the time he had spent aboard, still the knowledge that he would never again walk the decks of a supply-boat left him with a strange desire to linger out in the warm night air as they began their journey back to civilization. A desire to hang around and stroll those rusty old decks one last time.

And Gary, too, seemed to be in no hurry to leave the darkened deck that night, standing around long after the others had gone inside. Standing in the warm breeze that blew across the deck and looking up at the sky filled with stars, all in silence except for the loud rumble of the engines. He stood out there as though he had no desire to lay down and get what sleep he could before his turn came to relieve Gabe on the bridge a few hours from then. His turn to go up and drive the ship toward home—using Coonass Navigation—after which all of them would have to come out at some godawful hour in the morning to perform a coonass docking. Their last one ever, going out to lasso those pilings one final time.

The two friends soon gravitated together on the otherwise deserted deck, standing side by side with their eyes on the beautiful night sky and without a word between them, each lost in the world of his own thoughts. And they had been like that for some minutes, Gabe just telling himself that it was time for him to go to the bridge and relieve the Captain, when suddenly Gary broke the silence. "So tell me, when're we headin' for the Lakes?"

"We...?" Gabe hadn't seen that one coming at all, and it took him a moment to react, searching his memory for the things he had been wanting to say on the subject during all those days when Gary had been dodging it. About his own plan to join the officers' union once he got up there, and about the plan for Gary to stay with him until he managed to straighten things out with his own union or to get into a new one, whichever the case may be. And then as he began to talk and to lay things out, Gary said almost nothing in reply, mostly just listening and nodding his head.

Once Gabe had finished what he had to say, he faded back into silence, feeling much more contented now though also knowing that his time was fast running out. That he had to get up to the bridge soon, so that any further discussion would have to wait. But then before he could take his leave, Gary all at once broke the silence again, coming out with another of those seemingly out-of-the-blue statements. "Ya know, I been thinkin' a lot about all that stuff you and Billie were fightin' about. All that... you know, that freedom *from* and freedom *to* stuff."

"Huh...?" All that what? What the hell was this guy talking about?

"You know, like with the way that you always believe so much in that freedom *from* type-a stuff, that freedom from this and that and the other thing, while Billie's just... Only thing he ever believed in was freedom *to*."

Wha-a-at? Gabe had no idea what the guy was trying to say, so of course there was no way for him to reply. Because their fight had never been about freedom from or anything of the sort. It had been about exploitation and harassment and gay-bashing.

"Well ya know, I think you were both wrong in a way. Cause it's not about freedom *from* or freedom *to* or both of em put together. No, it's about freedom *is*, man. That's what it's about. It's like... I mean, freedom has to be organic or it's not real. Ya know what I mean? It's gotta be like... It's gotta come from inside ya, man. It's gotta be a part of ya."

Gabe saw no need to dignify the nonsense which his friend was spewing out with an answer, and so rather than say anything back, he chose to stare at the dark horizon.

An action which unfortunately did nothing to discourage Gary, perhaps even encouraged him to believe that his friend was busy pondering what he had said. Because the next thing Gabe knew, the guy was going on with those silly ideas of his. "Freedom's gotta be spontaneous, man. It's gotta come from *you*. And I don't really believe all that stuff they say about how ya can *do* what ya want, but ya can't *want* what ya want. Cause I think that's bogus, man. I think it's like... If ya ever really get to know yourself, and I mean all the way down inside, why then ya *can* want what ya want. Ya know what I mean? Ya really can."

Gabe should have heard the alarm bells going off as those words and phrases came his way. Should have and might have, too, had it not been for the warm glow which was coloring all his thoughts at that moment, the knowledge that the big guy would be coming along after all when he made his return to the north. Because the flaw in his plan should have been obvious as he listened to all that New Age gobbledygook which his friend was spouting off about. He should have seen the impossibility of ever converting Gary into a politically and socially conscious fighter for justice like himself.

“I think ya can, man. Cause like self-knowledge is the way, ya know, and it’s like if ya ever really get to know yourself, it’s only then that you’re gonna be free for real. Know what I mean? Ya can be like... Freedom *is*, man. Freedom *is*!”

Gabe should have realized his mistake right then, but he didn’t.

When morning arrived, Frank offered to give the two of them a ride back to the city, crammed together in the cab of his pickup truck. And then as he drove along, he began to ramble on about this and that, saying more to Gabe during the first half hour of the trip than he had said over the entire month-and-something that they had been together, it seemed. First, he told about a tropical depression that was supposed to be on its way toward the northern Gulf, the first of that hurricane season so far—and one that they wouldn’t have to deal with on that floating death-trap of a ship, fortunately. After that, he went on to talk about a number of other things, some of which took Gabe by complete surprise when he heard them from the mouth of a man he had always treated warily, taken for a foe, because they sounded so positive and upbeat. Like for instance, there was the moment when Frank told about having put in a good word for him with the company and about their desire to have him come back and work on the *Bullet* or some other supply-boat soon. Gabe could hardly believe his ears when he heard that. And Frank’s words only became predictable when he followed his advice to keep in touch with the company by throwing out the typical redneck phrase, “Only thing is, ya oughta cut your hair.”

Then there was another phrase which he spoke a bit later, one that proved to be so startling, so memorable, that it was to stick in Gabe’s mind long afterwards. It came at the end a brief analysis of the problems which had occurred aboard ship, one that included a surprisingly favorable assessment of the Mate’s actions. It came as a sort of final conclusion, spoken in a quiet, contemplative tone. “Ya know that Billie, he really don’t belong in this here century.”

Gabe had no idea what to say in response, practically dumbstruck at the whole idea. Because who would have thought that a redneck like Frank was capable of that sort of rational, reflective thought? Frank with whom he had never spoken outside the lines of business. Not until now. Who could have imagined that such deep mental processes were taking place behind that clown-like face of his? Running the full range of human thought and emotion. Far beyond the primitive, animal-like impulses normally associated with rednecks. Gabe could hardly get his mind around it at all, so that if it hadn’t been for Gary stepping in to take up the slack, the conversation in that car would have become a complete monologue. Because while Gabe was left nearly speechless, Gary seemed to take the whole thing in stride, not the least bit shocked or even thrown off-balance by what he was hearing. As though he had known all along about Frank, nothing coming as a revelation now.

Frank finally dropped them off at a hotel somewhere near downtown, as Gabe had requested during one of his few coherent moments. A hotel as far from Miss Flossy's as they could get. Though it wasn't that they were going to be in town for very long. Just long enough for Gary to take care of whatever business he had to do at the bank before they caught the next bus heading north. Back to God's country. And so it was still before noon the next day when the two of them were on their way, Gary having come back from the bank with a rather funny story about what had happened to him there. Telling about the strange looks he had received when he tried to cash his new paycheck, the people in the bank acting as though they didn't trust the check or the company behind it at all. Acting as though they expected the thing to bounce. And so not only had they refused to give him access to any of the funds from the check, but they had even told him that he would have to leave behind his required minimum balance for the account from the funds which he had transferred there earlier from back home—wherever that was. Because as far as they were concerned, that check of his was absolutely worthless.

Once they were on the bus rolling northward, it didn't take long for the two of them to run low on conversation. It was only a matter of miles before they had finished off the subject of their experiences together over the last month-and-a-half, and the subject of their plans for the future lasted an even shorter time. After which there was nothing left for them to discuss but the sights they were seeing outside the windows and of course politics, Gabe attempting from time to time to teach his friend what he could about the issues of the day, though as he did so, his efforts seemed to be going nowhere. Because while Gary may not have been repeating his old "I ain't into politics" mantra, still his eyes would visibly glaze over each time that Gabe tried to bring up the subject. He would hardly say a word in reply, and it wouldn't be long before he was staring out the window with a faraway look in his eyes. That look which can be so dangerous in the case of seamen: the sign that they are getting ready to ship out—or to quit the ship on which they are currently sailing.

Gabe was starting to lose the guy. He could see that he was. Though somehow that fact bothered him less and less with the further north that they went. Especially so after they changed buses in a major city near the center of the country and began their journey into the north for real. Gabe returning at last to the land of his own people, the land where he had always lived, while Gary was... What was he doing and what was he thinking? It was hard to tell when the guy wasn't saying a word. When all he was doing was staring out the window with that look in his eyes. That faraway look.

It had been a mistake to bring him along, Gabe could see that now. It had been a terrible mistake, and with each passing mile he asked himself ever more seriously what the hell he could have been thinking. Because while he may have needed the guy with him back in those dark days on the Gulf, those days when he had searched for a job while meeting with nothing but rejection, those days spent aboard that floating slum, that mental and spiritual cesspool, all that was behind him now. Those days were finished and he was on his way to something better, off to a place where Gary would no longer be the source of strength and support that he had once been, but rather one in which he was likely to become a burden. A constant reminder of the bad times, his mere presence making it impossible for Gabe ever to put them behind him. Ever to let go of his failures and get on with his life.

Because their entire southern friendship seemed to be taking on a distinctly northern chill as they continued on in that direction. A chill that grew colder and more pronounced by the minute and the mile as Gabe came to resent his soon-to-be-former friend a little more each time that he looked his way, while Gary appeared to retreat ever further away from their deteriorating reality. Staring out the window almost continuously by now, not saying a word or even looking at his friend anymore, just staring at the world outside with that faraway look. As though his thoughts were riding off into the sunset time and time again, riding off into some other life, some other future.

And so it came as no surprise to Gabe when Gary left him all at once in a northern town. In fact, it came as something of a relief when he did so, the big guy suddenly coming to life in response to something that he saw outside the window, it appeared. Perhaps the freight-yard they were passing, or perhaps it was the old hobo walking around in it. Though whatever it may have been that caught his attention at that moment, Gary's eyes seemed to light up all at once. And then as he turned and spoke, he did so with a passion that Gabe had rarely heard. "Freedom *is*, man. Freedom *is*!" he said before standing up and reaching for his little seabag. And then, "Freedom *is*!" he repeated as he got off the bus at the next stop. No goodbye, nothing but those few words as he left Gabe to finish the trip alone.

Off to the Lakes where he would be able to resume his old life. His career in that dying industry, as he would finally manage to go deep-sea only after the life he dreamed of had virtually disappeared, fallen victim to containerization and to the naïve free-market policies of the eighties. Those years during which American shipping companies were forced to play by a set of free-market rules while companies from the rest of the world were allowed to cheat to their hearts' content. With highly predictable results.

Off to work and fight for the Revolution as well. That Revolution which would never be.

PART VI

DECISION

In which the question is weighed: action or inaction in response to that which has been named, recalled and thought about.

ENTER GABRIEL

Nicknames were so common in Gabriel's family that there was little chance he would ever use his real name. Instead, he went by a number of typical little kid while names growing up, names such as Buddy and Junior—a name which he was called for several years despite the fact that he wasn't a Jr. But then as he approached his teenage years, he felt an urge to change his name into something that was more his own. Something that made reference to music—Gabriel come blow your horn, and all that. So that when he heard one day about a series of books and even a movie in which the hero was a guy named Hornblower, that was what he decided to call himself over the next several years. Until with time he grew tired of having such a long, awkward name and began to search for something simpler instead. Finally settling upon the name of the greatest horn-blower of them all: Satchmo. A name which soon evolved into Satch. After the trumpet player, not that goofy guy in the Bowery Boys.

The real reason behind his desire to have a musical nickname wasn't simply the coincidence of his given name, however. No, it was actually because of the fact that Satch loved music more than anything else in the world. He could spend whole days listening to records or the radio, singing along and beating out the rhythms on his thighs. And if only wishes were ever granted—if only his talent for music had been in direct proportion to his love for music—Satch would have grown up to be a professional musician. No questions asked. He might even have been a star. Though unfortunately for him, he wasn't blessed with the requisite talent or even with some minimal level of talent. His singing voice was so bad and so far off-key as to make Bob Dylan blush, while his ability with instruments was hardly any better, having no ear for harmony or melody or anything else. Nothing but rhythm. Which might have been enough to make him into a top-notch drummer had he ever gotten the opportunity to learn and practice when he was a kid. Had it not been for the fact that his school was too poor to offer anything in the way of a music program, while his family was even worse. So poor that there were times when they didn't have enough to eat, so that the purchase of a drum set could never be more than an impossible dream. Even a set of store-bought drumsticks beyond their means, struggling as they did to get by.

As is so often the case with a family that struggles in that way, the main cause of their financial problems was the father, a lazy, selfish man who never held a job in his life that Satch could remember. He was a man who preferred instead to live off his wife, lounging around the house or going out drinking with his buddies whenever he could beg-borrow-or-steal a few dollars from her. And then as though to add insult to injury, he abandoned that family of his on

more than one occasion, disappeared without a trace only to come crawling back a few months later when his new girlfriend had gotten tired of him and thrown him out. And luckily for him, he was taken back in on each occasion by a wife who must have loved him in spite of himself. Or at least one who felt sorry for him and was too big-hearted to turn him away when he had nowhere else to go.

Because it was Satch's mother who held the family together through all those years of hardship. It was she who struggled heroically to keep the kids clothed and fed, working at low-paying jobs and getting whatever aid she could from the government, and then hiding her money as best she could. Hiding it in hopes that her husband wouldn't find it and spend it all on himself, as he inevitably would. Fighting to scrape by in any way that she could under conditions so difficult that it was often a close thing whether they were going to make it through another year, another month, another day.

And Satch loved his mother for everything that she did for them, everything that she sacrificed. He loved her in a way that he would never love anyone else. No one but her father, that is. His Grandpa, the only real father-figure that he ever had in his life and the man he wanted to be like when he grew up. Because Grandpa was everything that his father wasn't: strong and confident and hardworking, the type of man that any boy was bound to admire. He was a farmer who owned his own plot of land and worked for himself, never groveling before a boss and never asking for a handout. But instead he was a man who made his own life in his own way, living alone on that farm of his ever since his wife had passed away.

And not only was Grandpa the only real man that Satch ever knew, but at the same time he was a man who kept a lot of the little boy inside him, playing with Satch and his brother and sisters whenever they came to visit. Playing just like he was one of them. Laughing and wrestling with them as he sat in his chair, sometimes using only one of his big, strong hands to take on the entire group of them. Oh, what great times they had together. All that laughter and joy, enough to turn those visits to the farm into the most treasured memories of his childhood. Those visits which were the only times that he ever saw Grandpa since the old man never came to see them in the small city where they lived, always claiming to be too busy to leave his farm. Too busy or perhaps too afraid to enter that other world, that urban setting where he would have been so far out of place, as Satch slowly came to realize over time. So that while he may have found it highly disappointing back when he was small, it was probably all for the best in the long run, never seeing Grandpa in a place that might have dulled some of the luster that seemed to surround him and his farm.

Some of the golden glow which would always bathe Satch's memories of the old man and that wonderful world of his. That little fairy-tale world in a way. Tiny in actual fact, a farm so small as to provide Grandpa with little beyond a bare subsistence, though still it seemed gigantic to Satch back when he was young. Because it was so much bigger and more wide-open than the city streets to which he was accustomed, that world in which the land was all their own and the food grew right out of the ground. And all of it so lush and green and beautiful, so much better than the crowding and squalor in which he normally lived, that it seemed almost like a vision, like a glimpse of heaven.

Better than any other place he ever saw—outside the television set, that is. Because even more magical than the farm was the world which Satch discovered on his visits to the neighbors' house to watch their TV, dropping by as often as he could until his mother finally managed to save up enough money to buy them a set of their very own. It was a world that was so much brighter than the one in which he lived, filled with happy people living in big houses and never worrying about where their next meal would come from, always having something funny to say or something interesting to do. And he quickly fell in love with that world, swearing to himself that he was going to go off and live there someday. Going to join those beautiful people living their wonderful lives, all of them so much smarter and richer and better looking than anyone he knew. None of the men spending their time hanging around doing nothing in the way that his father did, and none of the women so overworked and overweight as his mother, but instead they were better in every way possible. Better than his parents or his siblings or his friends or their parents. Better than anyone he ever knew. Anyone but Grandpa, that is.

Because Grandpa! He was the only one around there who was the real thing as far as Satch was concerned, the only one who was as good as the people he saw on TV. The only one who... Why, he was *Father Knows Best*, that's who he was. He was... He was *Leave It To Beaver*. He was Ward Cleaver in the flesh, calm and intelligent and understanding. He was the same guy exactly. Except for the fact that Ward Cleaver didn't live on a farm, of course. And except for the fact that he was white.

As he grew a bit older, Satch came to realize that the things he saw on television weren't real. A fact which may have hurt him on some level, destroying as it did his dream of entering into that world someday, though it served only to further reinforce his opinion of Grandpa and to raise him to an even higher level. Because unlike those fantasy gunfighters on TV, Grandpa was a real-life hero, one who stood up and did his part in the face of real-life dangers. Like during the Civil Rights days of Satch's childhood when he was one of the few people around that area who wasn't afraid to take a stand. Wasn't afraid to support the Freedom Riders and others when they came through town, giving them all the food that he could spare, more than he could spare, and marching with them a couple of times. And he even stood up to the Klan when they came in and tried to burn him out. He stood his ground and chased them away. Which was exactly the opposite of what his father did during those days. That lazy, drunken coward.

Satch was never going to be like him, he swore to himself. He was going to be a real man like Grandpa. He was going to live up to the old man's standards no matter what it took. And it was because of the tremendous respect which he felt for the old guy that even when he reached the age of teenage rebellion and acting-out, he never once rebelled against Grandpa. He never insulted him or picked a fight, not with the one adult in the world who was capable of understanding him. The only man he ever knew who was wise enough and tolerant enough to put up with him and his adolescent nonsense.

And in fact, if it hadn't been for Grandpa, Satch probably wouldn't have finished high school at all. He probably would have dropped out if not for fear of disappointing the old man, of failing to live up to his high standards. And perhaps it was also with Grandpa in mind that he decided to join the Navy when he got out of high school, decided to go off and see the world and do all the things that he had heard Grandpa talk about so many times over the years. Because he could remember all those occasions on which the old man had said that his one great regret in

life was the fact that he never went to sea when he was young, spending his whole life on the farm instead. Remembered them so well that once Satch reached the age where he was able to go out and do those things himself, he wanted to do them for the sake of both of them in a way. He wanted to join the Navy and see the world and then come back when he was on leave to tell the old man all about it. And oh how Grandpa loved it on that day when Satch finally came back for a visit! How he sat listening with rapt attention, saying over and over again, "Wow, I sure wish I could go with ya." And reacting with such genuine, almost childlike enthusiasm that Satch could hardly help himself as he began to improve upon the stories as best he could, began to invent details and to add drama to his delivery, even to appropriate whole incidents and experiences which he had heard about from others. Whatever it took to make his Grandpa happy. To please the old guy and impress him, and to turn that visit of his into a truly memorable day. One of the best days of both their lives.

So that if only he had gotten another chance to see Grandpa before he died so suddenly. One more chance to be with him and tell him stories before the stroke that killed him without warning one day. Just one more chance! But no, Satch was still in the Navy when Grandpa died. He was stationed off the coast of Vietnam where he couldn't even get permission to come home for the funeral. Nothing. Where all he could do was to sit around on the ship as he learned from a distance that the heart and soul had just fallen out of his life. The one central guiding-light of his entire existence. Because he was gone. The old man was gone, and Satch would never see him again. Never hear that easy laughter of his or those words of wisdom. He would never again be in the presence of his hero.

The family decided to get rid of the farm as quickly as they could, no one wanting to take it over. No one but Satch, that is. But since he was too far away to do anything about it at the time, the rest of them decided to take the money and run. The very few dollars which they managed to get, the farm being so small and the money being divided among so many heirs. And so by the time that Satch finally made it back for a visit, it was only to find that everything was gone. Everything was over with. His Grandpa was dead and buried, and the farm was in the hands of strangers. And as he looked around at what was left of that sorry excuse for a life and a family, he swore to himself that he would never return to live in that unhappy little world, never again set foot in the South except for the occasional visit to his mother. Because other than her, there was nothing there for him anymore. Nothing in that entire part of the country but bad memories of a sad and deprived childhood. And so rather than return to something like that when he got out of the service, he preferred instead to start all over again somewhere else. Some new place in which he would be able to make a whole new life for himself, unburdened by the past. Some place like the West Coast.

Because the West Coast could be a very good place for a black man to be in those days, especially if he happened to be one of the high-rollers in the music industry such as what Satch intended to become. Groupies everywhere, black and white and every shade between, and all the drugs that a guy could want. Not that he was into drugs, mind you, having tried just about all of them at one time or another only to come to the conclusion that the only one he really liked was the legal one. Good old booze. Though when it came to the groupies, he was more than ready. So eager that he could hardly wait to get his hands on them.

Before he could do that, though, Satch knew that he would have to find some way to make it into the big-time. Some way to turn himself into the star that he longed to be, and to do so in spite of the fact that he still faced the same old obstacle that he had always faced: his complete lack of musical talent. Because he couldn't possibly make it as a singer or musician, so that instead he would have to take some other path to stardom. Have to take what assets he had, such as the Radioman's training which he had received in the Navy, and then by combining that with his long-time love of music, he could use them to launch a career in broadcasting, he said to himself as the plan came into focus. A career in which he would quickly rise to fame and fortune. He hoped.

But a person doesn't start out at the top in a world like that, Satch understood that much. Though what he had failed to realize beforehand was just how hard it was going to be for him to start at the bottom, making the rounds of the radio stations and practically begging them for a job only to be told at one after another that they had nothing for him. Nothing at all. So that if it hadn't been for his firm belief in himself and his destiny, he might have lost hope long before he managed to land a job at the very last place he tried, at one of the smallest of all the local stations. It was a job which, as it turned out, was based more upon his technical skills than anything else, his ability to maintain and even repair the equipment as needed, though as something of a sop, the owner also threw in a few hours of DJ work each week. A few hours during which Satch would be able to do his thing, spinning records of the type that he loved—soul and funk and blues and jazz. A few hours of being himself and living his dream. So that while he knew that it was a very modest beginning that he was making, he also knew that it was bound to lead to something better sooner or later. It had to.

Even as it was, though, still it was a good life that he was living all at once, doing the thing that he loved and getting paid for doing it. With the only drawback being the fact that he was getting paid so little, barely enough to get by on. Though what more did he need when he was a single man living alone? he wondered. One who had enough money to eat every day and enough to get laid from time to time, so that he couldn't think of why he would ever need more. And in fact, it was thanks in large part to that job of his that he managed to have as much success with the ladies as he did in those days. Thanks to his suddenly having become a sort of minor local celebrity, one with an afro that was starting to grow out and a rap that was coming into its own. Everything that it took for a man like him to become a full-fledged chick-magnet, absolutely drawing the ladies to him. Not all of them, perhaps. Not as many as he might have dreamed about, but still he was doing better than he ever had before. A whole lot better.

And as he dipped his feet ever more deeply into that new and exciting world, there was a curious phenomenon taking place inside his head. One that may have been caused by the fast life he was living, or then again it may have been nothing more than the phenomenon that affects so many people after they move to the West Coast. That phenomenon in which their pasts seem to fall away from them as though their lives only began on the day they first moved west, all the rest fading to the point where they soon come to resemble the lives of others. Because that was exactly what was happening with Satch during his days as a DJ. His Southern past was fast disappearing from his memory. His mother, his father, the city in which he grew up, they were all starting to seem strange and foreign to him somehow. Even Grandpa becoming ever less distinct in his mind as the days went by. The old man and the farm and the time they spent

together, they were all growing dim for him. Dissipating almost into nothingness, with only the occasional pithy phrase left behind. The occasional snippet of wisdom.

Satch was out almost every night during those months, that year or two of his success, going to the places where everyone who was anyone in the music industry had to go, and soon he was getting to know them all. Most of them, anyway. The lightweights and the hangers-on. The small-timers of one description or another. All those people that he would remember—for better or for worse—after he had moved up into the big-time himself. And meanwhile at his job, he was gaining a lot of valuable experience. He was getting better at picking out music all the time, and he was getting better at filling in between songs. Or in other words, he was laying the solid foundations upon which his inevitable rise to the top would be constructed, while at the same time he was living out his dream day after day. Loving what he was doing and doing what he loved.

And he might have gone on in that way indefinitely had it not been for the ladies, or at least had it not been for that one particular lady. Jacki by name. Because if only Satch hadn't fallen in love with her, everything in his life would have turned out differently. It would have followed a completely different path. Though it was thanks to that love... Or not love exactly since that was never really what he felt for her. It was more like a feeling of fondness and respect instead. Something similar enough to love that when he found out that he had gotten her pregnant, he knew that he would have to do the right thing. He would have to marry her. But then with the sudden introduction into his life of a second mouth to feed, to be followed shortly by a third, his already precarious financial situation became totally unsustainable all at once.

So Satch had to do something about it. He had to move up in the world, and he had to move up now. But when he went to see his boss and ask for a raise, he got absolutely nothing. Not a penny more. Nothing but an offer to switch hours if that would make things easier for him. And then when he tried going around to the bigger stations, the managers there would hardly let him through the door. Even his so-called friends. All of them making it clear that they weren't hiring, or at least that they weren't going to hire him.

And so given the financial dead-end which the two of them faced, it didn't take long before Jacki began to pressure him to go out and look for some other type of work. One that had nothing to do with the music industry. Pushing an idea which Satch found so abhorrent that he refused even to consider it. Not at first, anyway. Not until after the reality of their empty bank account and their mounting bills had slowly but surely begun to sink in upon him, eating away at his resistance and undermining his will, his very picture of himself as a man. Not until finally he could see no other recourse but to cave in and agree to go out looking for a job that had nothing to do with his dreams. One that would be practical and pay the bills for himself and his family. A job which he may have set out to find with a near-total lack of enthusiasm, though still his search was to end in success. End with him receiving a job offer that was much too good to pass up. Too bad as well since he really didn't want to say yes. It was to end with him starting out on a whole new career as a mailman.

A mailman! Satch could hardly believe it, the way that his inevitable rise to the top of the music industry had somehow taken a detour into a job as a mailman. Or actually it had become two jobs at first, mailman by day and DJ by night since he took his boss up on the offer of a

change in hours. But it didn't take long before that tough new schedule began to wear him down, always working and never sleeping. It didn't take long before he began to realize that he couldn't go on in that way. He couldn't, but he did. Because while he may have known that he had to hold onto the day job as long as he had a wife and kid to feed, his whole being rebelled at the thought of dropping the night job. Dropping everything that meant anything to him. Abandoning the dream which had brought him there in the first place, the illusion which had sustained him and fulfilled him in a way that nothing else ever had or ever would. And so he held onto that night job and held on. He kept at it until finally it became physically impossible to go on. Until he practically collapsed from exhaustion one night, a nervous breakdown almost, ranting and crying over the radio and getting himself fired in the process. And in that way completing his evolution into a full-time mailman.

It wasn't that being a mailman was a bad job, though. No, there was nothing wrong with it that Satch could see. Lots of fresh air and lots of walking. And since he always carried a little transistor radio with him when he made his rounds, he had music wherever he went, music that he even danced to sometimes when his spirits were high and the song was good. So it was a good life that he was living in those days, no question about it. A low-pressure job and a wife waiting for him when he got home, along with a kid. Two kids after awhile. It was a dream come true for a guy who grew up poor in the South, and if only it had been *his* dream then everything might have worked out fine.

But it wasn't his dream at all, and it didn't take long before Satch began to grow restless with the life he was living. It didn't take long before he began to step out on his wife in the evenings, first going out to some of his old haunts only to find that they weren't the same anymore. Not with him being a mailman now rather than a DJ on the rise. A DJ living his dream. And in fact, the shame was so great on that one evening when he was maneuvered into admitting his present occupation by one of his so-called friends that he swore to himself never to return to that world again. Or at least not until after he had re-established himself in the music industry. While in the meantime he would have to look for brand-new places to hang out. Places where they hadn't known him back in his glory days so that his recent downfall wouldn't be so obvious. But then even as he discovered and began to hang out in those new places, still he found that it was impossible for him to feel good about himself anymore. His self-disgust, his self-loathing growing so rapidly that it wasn't long before he was drinking more than he ever had before. Drinking more though enjoying it less, and all the while asking himself on some deep, inner level if this was really what his life had come down to. If this was really the entire future that he had to look forward to.

Along with the drinking, Satch also cheated on his wife whenever the opportunity presented itself during his nights on the town. Of course he did. Because he was a man, wasn't he? He needed a little variety in his life. He couldn't be expected to be faithful to a woman who was always the same, always the same. He needed something more than that. He needed a change of pace from time to time, picking up on any woman that he could get in those bars where he hung out. Picking up on the drunks, the easy ones since he no longer had his DJ status with which to impress the classier ones, but instead he had to be content with the types of women that a mailman with a drinking problem could pick up on.

Women such as that floozy who finally got him into trouble with Jacki on the day she found out about it. That floozy who threw herself at him, positively threw herself. That was what he told Jacki, anyway. Not that she believed him. But in any case, he couldn't understand why it was that she got so excited about that one little indiscretion on his part when she knew damned well that there had been other cases over the months and years, lots of other cases. And he couldn't understand why it was that she wanted to throw him out of the house over that one little incident. That one little one-night-stand.

But out of the house he went. And if Satch had thought that his life was depressing before, he quickly found that it had been nothing compared to what it now became, living in a cheap little room all by himself. The first time he had slept alone in years, the first time he had gotten up in the morning or come home in the afternoon to find no one around. No wife, no kids, nothing. Just his boring old self. And then after a few days of that, when he felt that he couldn't take it anymore and decided to go by the apartment and try to talk things out, all it did was to make matters worse. Because Jacki refused to listen, and she refused to let him in. She wouldn't so much as open the door, yelling at him as he stood outside in the hallway and telling him to go away and come back on the weekend. Telling him that it was all over between the two of them, that he would never get her back, but that he could at least have the kids for the day on Saturday if he wanted them.

And him? He didn't know what to do in a situation like that. He didn't have the energy to break down the door like he knew that he should. He didn't have the fire inside. And in fact, he barely had enough energy to do what he finally did: go out and get drunker than ever that night. And then come back on Saturday as he had been told.

So Satch had the kids for a full day on that first weekend and the next one as well and the one after that. Though rather than helping to make him feel less lonely, the only thing those family-days did was to make the other six days of the week seem even worse, those days when he was so completely alone. Not that he was a kid-person or anything of the sort, the type of guy who loved being around kids in the way that Grandpa always had. Because while he may have liked his kids well enough, loved them in fact, he liked it a whole lot better when he could keep them at a certain distance. When he could play with them for a little while and then leave them for someone else to take care of. Their mother, for instance. Because those days on which he had to do the full-time parent thing got to be awful old for him awful damned fast.

Even as it was, though, still he might have adapted to the situation over time and learned to put up with it indefinitely. Might have gone on in that way for the rest of his life, in fact, a part-time father and full-time mailman, had it not been for that one day. That day when Buddy, the older of his two kids, told him a very interesting piece of news. Buddy who was at that age where there are no such things as secrets. Because what he told his father on that day was the story of his mother's new sleeping arrangements, talking about some new guy who had moved in with them as soon as Satch had moved out. Some guy named Hugh or Hughie, something like that. A guy who had come to live in the apartment even before Satch's side of the bed had gone cold. And as he listened to the story that his boy had to tell, there were a lot of things that suddenly began to come clear in his head. Things like the real reason for Jacki having thrown him out of the house when she had, what with the fact that she had that Hughie character waiting in the wings, ready to step in the moment her husband stepped out.

But what really broke the camel's back for Satch on that day was when he heard Buddy say that Hughie didn't have a job of any kind. That all he did was to sit around the house, eating their food and watching their TV. Because no sooner had he heard those words than visions of his own father came flashing into his head. Bad memories of a guy that he hadn't thought about in years, a guy he had done his best to forget. But now here they were all at once, all those painful memories flooding back in. And to make matters worse, Satch quickly came to realize that Hughie wasn't just living off his woman in the way that his father always had. No, he was living off *him*! Off Satch!! The guy was living off the money that *he* sent them. Fucking his wife and playing with his kids and spending the money that *he* earned.

It was almost too much for him to bear, and there's no telling what he might have done to Hughie or to Jacki that evening after the kids were gone if not for his decision to go out and fortify himself with a drink before he took any action. A drink which was followed by another and then another until finally he was completely gone. Stinking drunk. Too far out of it to do anything but drag himself back to his cheap little room and flop into bed.

And so it wasn't until the next day, Sunday, as the hangover slowly began to wear off, that Satch ever got the chance to begin thinking things out. To ask himself what he should do and how he should react. Asking how Grandpa would have reacted to a situation like this. Because what would the old man have done if it was him? Would he have killed the guy? Would he have killed the wife? No, it didn't seem likely that Grandpa would have done any of those drastic things. It just wasn't his style. But since drastic measures were what Satch wanted to take right then, what other options did he have? His instincts were telling him to do something final, something that would put an end to the whole damned thing. Because Jacki? She wasn't worth it. She was nothing but a... a... a whore!

There was only one useful piece of grandfatherly advice that came to Satch's mind as he pondered his predicament that day, one piece which might have had some bearing upon the case at hand, that being the old saw about making his decisions and then sticking by them. With no regrets and no looking back. Or as the old man used to say it, once you've gone and planted sweet potatoes on your land, that's what you're gonna be growing is sweet potatoes, and it's too late to worry about whether you should be growing corn instead. So that in other words, Satch's only course of action right then was to make a choice, a final choice. It was to pick out what his sweet potatoes were going to be and then stick them into the ground.

He was still so mad at Jacki that he could hardly think straight. Because the betrayal! The sense of violated trust was so strong within him that the only thing he could think to do was to get the hell out of there. Quit his job and go off to live somewhere else and never have anything to do with her again. Leave her to get by with that new man of hers in any way that she could, and to do so without a penny of his money to live on. And if that meant that he would have to abandon the kids at the same time, there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing but feel sorry for them, that is. Because they were stuck with the mother that they had, weren't they? They were stuck with whatever life she chose to make for them. Whatever her version of sweet potatoes might be.

So forget about them! Forget about regrets and second thoughts. Satch wasn't going to allow those things to enter his mind. But instead he was going to walk away without a look back.

Without a single thought for the life he had been living over the last few years and the people he had known, those people who were already starting to fade into history even before he had finished laying his plans. Fading so quickly that by the time he went down to the post office the next day to quit his job—no forwarding address, just a, “See ya later”—they were completely behind him. Too far gone even to be visible in the rearview mirror.

Satch withdrew all the money that he could from his bank account that day, and then after grabbing the few things that he wanted to take with him—his favorite clothes and pictures of the kids from the good days and his transistor radio—he left the rest behind and headed for the airport where he parked his old clunker of a car with the keys still in it. Left it sitting there in the lot for the first guy who wanted to steal it as he walked inside to buy himself a ticket, a one-way to a major northeastern city whose music he had always liked. A ticket which would take him off to a whole new life, a better life. Because in the same way that his life in the South had come to an end a number of years back, he knew that his life on the West Coast was now over with as well. He knew that he would never go back to live there again, starting all over somewhere else instead.

But it wasn't going to be easy for him to do so, as he soon began to learn. It was going to be even harder this time around than it had been before, what with him being older now, a member of the soul-music generation looking for work at a time when disco was king. A time when everyone was playing disco, it seemed. Even the white stations. And since it was impossible for Satch to hide his lack of enthusiasm for that type of music, that watered-down pseudo-funk, it didn't take long before the writing began to appear upon the wall. Rejection after rejection leading him steadily toward the conclusion that no radio station was going to hire him. Ever. That in fact his day was already done, gone in a flash along with all the great music of his glory days. Leaving nothing behind but a still-young relic whose experience was now completely worthless.

That was what Satch found the case to be with the music scene in the first city he tried anyway, along with the second and third cities as well. And then as his bankroll began to grow alarmingly thin, he started to look for any type of work that he could get. Anything at all. Because the suddenly looming prospect of absolute destitution quickly proved even more frightening than the thought of abandoning his dream forever. The prospect that he might soon find himself with nowhere to live and nothing to eat. Nothing to drink either, as his thirst for alcohol seemed to grow in direct proportion to the rate at which his hopes for the future declined. And that's not to mention his self-image and his self-respect and even his grooming, his clothes and everything about him growing dirtier and shabbier with each passing day.

And then with his money supply dwindling and his appearance deteriorating rapidly, the next thing Satch knew he was starting to have problems with the police. Real problems, not just the little day-to-day hassles that every black man grows up with, but serious problems instead. Dangerous problems. The types of hassles and rousts that could lead to major jail time if ever he were guilty of something more serious than drunk-in-public or vagrancy. Because not only did he look worse with each passing day, but at the same time his self-confidence had nearly vanished. His West Coast cool. And he was finding that he could no longer talk his way out of anything as he dealt with cops who seemed ever more determined to run him out of town, one city after another. Telling him that he wasn't wanted around there. Telling him to move on.

When it came to his job-search, all he seemed to be getting were dirty looks, with more and more places refusing even to let him through the door, including some of the low-down, low-paid places. Making it all too clear that by that time, Satch's prospects for a job had fallen to somewhere very close to zero. Exactly the same as what was happening with his money supply, falling so fast that almost before he knew it, he found himself carrying the stick, as the old expression goes. Sleeping in all-night movie theaters or bus stations or any other place that he could find, and panhandling on the street when he needed a meal or a bottle.

And of all the indignities which he had to suffer during those dark days, the panhandling was by far the hardest to take. The hardest on his sense of pride. Because the whole idea of being forced to ask for money from strangers, and not asking for it man-to-man, but asking for it like a beggar instead. Oh, it was terrible! It was something that he hated himself for having to do. And it didn't take very many panhandling sessions before he swore that he was going to get the hell out of there. Now! He was going to give up on the Northeast which had turned out to be such a bust, a waste of time which had plunged him into a low that he never would have thought possible before. But if he was going to get out of there, where else did he have to go? He couldn't go back to the South and not to the West Coast either. He couldn't go crawling back to either of those places after the way he had abandoned them with such pride, such resolution. Because as low as he may have fallen, still he hadn't fallen that far. Not yet. But if all those places were off the list, then what did he have left? What besides the center of the country? The heartland. The Midwest.

If he wanted to get there, though, Satch knew that he would never be able to afford a bus ticket, and since hitchhiking was out of the question for him, no one ever stopping to pick up a black hitchhiker, that meant that the only means of transportation available was the freight trains. Hopping into empty boxcars and riding along like some type of latter-day hobo. A move which may have seemed like a big step backward for a guy who once dreamed of becoming one of the giants of the music industry, though in some ways it might actually prove to be a step up from what he had become over recent weeks and months.

A definite step up, as it turned out to be, since no sooner had Satch entered into that strange, marginal world than he seemed to find himself right at home. Like all at once, he was in the place where he had always belonged, hopping freights and sleeping in hobo jungles and getting by on his wits. He was right where his talents lay, as he soon came to realize. Those talents which he had never before been able to discern. Because he turned out to be a natural when it came to getting by in that world. A born king-of-the-road. He seemed to have an instinct for the whole way of life and the things that he had to deal with out there. And then as he became aware of the strange new "success" which he was suddenly enjoying in life, he began to feel better about himself than he had in years. His self-confidence began to rise, soon reaching the levels of his glory days. Or even above those levels as he saw himself entering into a whole new phase in his life. A triumphant phase. One that was far above anything that he had ever known. One that threatened to put even his glory days at the radio station into the shade. One that...

Or then again, maybe that was just the booze talking.

Because Satch was still drinking a lot during those days, the only difference being the fact that now he was starting to enjoy it once again, going out and buying himself a bottle

whenever he could afford one and then getting ecstatically drunk. And in the meantime, he was wandering about to nowhere in particular, wherever the freights happened to take him. Always on the lookout for easy money to be scrounged up and especially on the lookout for places with good radio stations to listen to, stations playing soul and funk that he could pick up on his little transistor radio. And he would listen to that music alone since he trusted no one that he met in that cruel, indifferent world. Not black, not white, not any color. And especially not the old winos who he knew would stab him in the back for a quarter or a sip of cheap wine.

So he kept to himself when he was out on the road, his only friends his radio and his bottle, and he went just about everywhere during that spring and summer. That summer of the nation's malaise, as the president himself implied in a speech he gave that July. It was the summer during which everything that had come before seemed to have run its course. When the decades of prosperity which had followed the Second World War seemed to have become mired in endless rounds of stagflation, and when all the hopes and dreams of change of a few years before seemed to have come to nothing. Slightly new attitudes perhaps, though when it came to substance, there wasn't a thing that was different. And even the rebellious youth of his generation's early years seemed to have vanished without a trace, replaced by a conformist youth that was perfectly happy with the role which society had ordained for it: that of mindless consumers. While as for those few young people who still persisted in their rebellion against that fate, for the white ones anyway, the only path open to them during those days of hopelessness and decay was the skin-deep revolution of punk. A revolution in hair-styles but little more.

It was a summer of personal malaise for Satch as well, though he didn't want to admit that fact to himself. It was a time of total drift, a time when he was always alone, scraping by on the outer fringes of a hostile world. Friend and companion to no one. Not until that one day, that is. That day when his solitude was so suddenly and so rudely interrupted.

It happened late in the afternoon one midsummer day as he sat by himself in an otherwise abandoned hobo jungle on the outskirts of a town that lay somewhere between the Mississippi River and what could be called the eastern edge of the northern Great Plains. He sat on a rock, facing in the direction from which he expected any company to arrive, the direction of the railyard. And as he sat there, he was listening to his little radio, the volume turned up high enough to mask any nearby sounds, evidently. Because all at once, without warning, he heard a voice that came from somewhere just behind him. A deep but soft and gentle voice. "Hey man, how's it goin'?"

"Huh!!?" Satch practically jumped out of his skin at the sound, and whirling around, he saw a big white guy standing there a few paces away. A big guy! One who was even bigger than Satch himself. And if the guy hadn't been standing in such a friendly, non-aggressive pose, Satch might have followed his initial instinct, his survival instinct, which was to launch an immediate assault. To jump the guy before the guy could jump him. Though quickly taking stock of that posture, of the gentle tone of the guy's voice, he soon decided to limit his attack to a verbal one. "Man, what the fuck ya sneakin' up on a guy like that for!? Whatta ya want?"

"Hey man, I'm sorry. I didn't wanta... I wasn't tryin' to..." The big guy was stumbling all over himself in his effort to apologize.

But Satch was having none of it. “Man, get the fuck outa here! Leave me alone.”

“I tell ya I’m sorry, man, but I just... I wanted to know...”

“Where the fuck ya comin’ from, anyway? Sneakin’ up on a guy like that.”

“I wasn’t sneakin’ up, I was just comin’ from town is all. From the bus station.”

“The bus station...?” Satch paused to look the guy over more closely, wondering what exactly he was dealing with since there was nothing about him that seemed to fit into any mould. He was too big and strong and good-looking to be a bum, and he was too old to be some kid out looking for an adventure. He must have been thirty or something like that. Too young for a midlife crisis. So then what the hell was he doing out there?

“Yeah, I just didn’t wanta keep on goin’ to... You know...”

“So ya comin’ over here to bother me!?”

“No, I was just... I heard all that good music was all...”

Good music!? Did he just say that? Did he say that he liked the music? Satch’s attitude toward the guy seemed to be softening all at once. “So whatta ya want?” he asked in a voice that was milder now than before.

“I was just wonderin’ when the next train’s goin’ out is all. The next one goin’ west, ya know.”

“The next train? Whatta I look like, the fuckin’ information lady or somethin’?”

“No, I just thought that like... You know, maybe you’d...”

“Well, I don’t know,” Satch cut the guy off. Though despite his intentions, the words that came out of his mouth didn’t have the finality to them which he had been expecting. As though there were something inside him that was holding back. Something that wanted him to invite the guy to stick around and join him.

And perhaps the big guy could sense as much. “Hey, are ya hungry? I got some sandwiches and stuff in here,” he said in a more confident tone as he nodded toward the grocery bag which he had cradled in one arm, the other arm being raised, holding a bigger bag of some sort on his shoulder.

“Yeah...?” Satch eyed the grocery bag with no clear idea how to respond, wondering whether to accept the offer of food and friendship or to send the guy on his way once and for all. Because the guy seemed okay as he looked him over once again, maybe even a little bit cool. For a white guy. And the prospect of free food was truly tempting despite the fact that Satch really didn’t need it, not desperately anyway. Not when he had a few cans of food stashed away in his bedroll, along with a few dollars in his pocket. And that’s not to mention the fact that he had spare batteries for his radio and an almost-full packet of rolling papers to go along with the two

or three days' supply of cigarette butts for re-rolling which he had managed to accumulate. So it wasn't like he couldn't get by without that food. It wasn't like...

"Is it okay?" The big guy interrupted his reverie all at once, motioning with his head to indicate that he wanted to sit down and speaking in such a calm, friendly tone as to allay all suspicion.

A tone to which Satch's body seemed to respond in spite of himself and his misgivings, so that almost before he knew it, he was raising his arm and holding it out in a help-yourself gesture. One at which the big guy soon did exactly as he had been told, flopped down the object which he had been carrying on his shoulder, a little seabag as it turned out to be, and took a seat on a log that faced Satch's rock from across the small, unused fire-pit. And then after reaching into that grocery bag of his, the guy pulled out a sandwich and held it out. "Here ya go. I hope ya like chicken salad."

Like it? Satch could hardly believe his eyes as he gazed upon that sandwich. Because while he had been expecting one of those buy-the-fixings-and-make-it-yourself type of things, it turned out that what the guy was handing him was the real thing instead. One of those high-class, prefab sandwiches, all wrapped up in cellophane. So expensive that he hadn't been able to afford anything like it since he couldn't remember when. And not only was it a thing of beauty to gaze upon, but at the same time it was being offered to him in such a straightforward, man-to-man sort of way. With no implication of begging. Nothing but a simple sharing between friends, the big guy's sandwich and Satch's music.

And then no sooner had Satch gotten the wrapper off the thing and bitten into it than all at once he was in heaven. Savoring what had to be the most delicious sandwich he had ever eaten, so soft and soggy and full of pre-packaged flavoring. The sort of gastronomic luxury of whose existence he had nearly forgotten. His mouth rejoicing in that wonderful taste as his spirits rose higher, ever higher, and as the last of his resistance to the big guy's charms seemed to fade away. His attitude growing mellower by the minute, by the bite. Softening until soon it had become almost as mushy as the sandwich he was eating.

"Ya want another one? I got a tuna salad," the bug guy said as he finished his own sandwich and reached back into his bag.

Making an offer to which Satch still wasn't quite sure how to respond. Because he had been so hostile to everyone around him for such a long time by then that he had almost forgotten how to be friendly. Forgotten how to speak in a civil tone, so that the only reply he was able to give was through gestures. Through reaching over to turn up the volume on his little radio while turning it to face directly toward his new companion, before finally he extended his hand to accept the proffered sandwich. And then as he started in on it, he began to ask himself once again what could be going on with this guy. So open and outgoing in what was normally a guarded and defensive world, at least on Satch's part, and at the same time the guy was so far from all the usual stereotypes of the road. He was a guy who not only looked nothing like your typical hobo or bum, but he was also one who carried things with him that no bum would ever carry. All that high-class food and that little seabag, too. Because that wasn't the type of thing that most guys

carried with them when they were out on the road. No, they carried sleeping bags or bedrolls, something like that. Something they could sleep in. They didn't carry seabags.

Satch wanted to ask the guy about the bag and everything else that he could think of, but he didn't know how to begin. Not when it had been so long since he had engaged in any sort of normal human interaction, spoken with anyone besides the cops who roused him or the people he was trying to gather information from. So what could he say to this guy now? he wondered. What beyond a few more mumbled thank yous and grunts of pleasure as he ate? What could he say in order to start a real conversation with the guy? This big white guy who might turn out to be his first friend ever on the road.

"So I wonder where I can find out about trains headin' west outa here," the big guy finally broke the silence for him.

Going west? Didn't the guy realize that they ran north-and-south through there? That he would have to make a connection up north before he could catch anything heading west? Because where did he think he was, anyway?

Satch wasn't sure whether to say anything about it, though. Whether it was better to keep the guy in the dark so that he would stick around handing out sandwiches, or whether to level with him and send him on his way, most likely. Because the moment the guy found out what he was up against out there, he was bound to give up on the trains and go looking for an easier and faster way to get to where he was going. He was bound to head back to the bus station or else hit the other road and hitchhike to his destination, an option which was open to him, what with his being white.

And it wasn't just for the sandwiches that Satch wanted the guy to stick around either. No, it was for the companionship as well. It was for what he saw as his first chance to make a friend after having been so long a time without one. So then what could he possibly say to the guy that wouldn't chase him off? What could he do besides lie? Which was something that he hesitated to do with a potential friend. What besides change the subject? "So why ya goin' out... I mean, where ya goin' out west?"

"Who me? Oh, I'm goin' about as far as ya can go that way, man. I'm goin' all the way to the coast."

"The coast? You're goin' all the way to the West Coast? Shit man, that's a long ways from here." A bit of his surprise came out in Satch's voice.

"Yeah, I know, but I gotta like... I gotta get me a ship, man, and I was figurin' on gettin' my next one out there on the West Coast."

"A ship? Your next ship? So you're a...?"

"Yeah, I'm a seaman. That's me," the big guy answered in a matter-of-fact way. "And I was thinkin' that like... I can use a little change-a scenery, ya know, so I figured I'd go hit the other coast."

“The West Coast, huh?” It sounded a bit far-fetched to Satch, though at least the seaman part finally began to clear a few things up for him, began to fit the guy into a mould at last. Because that was exactly what he looked like now that Satch came to think about it. A seaman with that little seabag of his, not to mention the way he stood and walked and moved. Even the way he talked, in that simple, straight-forward way that so many seamen do. It was all starting to fall into place at last. The guy was a seaman who was down on his luck and far from the coast, and he was trying to get there in any way that he could. Not much money on him, and... Or wait a minute. If he was so broke, then what the hell was the guy doing with all those expensive sandwiches? Handing them out like they were nothing. Was he stupid or what?

“It’s gonna take awhile to get there, I guess, huh?” the big guy interrupted another silence before it could gather steam.

“Yeah, I guess. Clear to the coast. It’s gonna take ya like...” Satch wasn’t sure what he could say that wouldn’t scare the guy off by revealing the fact that it would take him many days to get there by train. Maybe a week. Maybe more. “It’s gonna take awhile.”

“Good! Cause I ain’t in one bit of a hurry.”

“No?”

“No man, I’m out here to enjoy the trip is what. All this beautiful summer weather and the scenery so nice, and a course there’s some good people to get to know out here.”

Good people!? What was this guy talking about now? Good people out here!? On the road!?! Didn’t he know that the road was filled with losers and lowlives? Didn’t he at least know that much? Or then again, had he actually meant that last statement as a sort of backhanded compliment to Satch? Saying that Satch was the good people—or person—that he would get to know out there? That could have been it, though since he had said it in such a broad, neutral tone, it was impossible to decipher his actual meaning. Impossible to determine whether he had been speaking about Satch or simply making some naïve statement about the ultimate goodness of the human race.

“Ya want an apple?” The bug guy cut off Satch’s reverie one more time as he reached back into his grocery bag.

And then as he held it out, Satch accepted the fruit even though it wasn’t what he wanted, eyeing the bag with his thoughts on other foods instead. On potato chips and junk food rather than apples. Or better still, with his thoughts on booze, hoping that before long the guy was going to pull out a bottle. Hoping against hope.

“Hey by the way, my name’s Gary,” the big guy said all at once. And then when Satch failed to respond immediately, he added, “So what’s yours?”

“Mine?” Satch wasn’t sure that he was ready to answer a question like that just yet, not when it sounded so personal all at once. The idea that the two of them were about to lose their previous identities, about to cease being the big white guy and the black guy, and to become actual people instead. People who had names and everything. A prospect which he found a bit

intimidating, while at the same time it was something which by then had become quite unfamiliar to him. Because as Satch thought back over the recent past, he couldn't remember the last time he had given his name to anyone. No one but the people he had tried to get work from or the cops who had roused him, that is. And in each of those cases, he had given them his official name rather than the real one. The name he was known by to his friends. "It's, uh... It's Satch." The word came out with difficulty.

"Satch? Ya mean like that guy in the Bowery Boys?"

"No!!" Satch wasn't shocked by the response. Not really. Not when he had heard it so many times before. But he was disappointed, sorely disappointed to hear it now, having been expecting something better from this guy. "No! Not like that. It's like Satchmo."

"Oh, like Satchmo..." Gary said hesitantly, evidently taken aback at the sudden chill in Satch's voice. "Like Louis Armstrong, huh? Like... Hey wow man, what a cool name."

"Yeah, right..." Cool. Real cool now that I went and explained it to ya. Now ya like it. Now ya think it's cool. Ya goddamned phony.

Gary stirred uncomfortably as an awkward silence began to descend upon that little campsite of theirs. And he glanced about as though searching for a way out of the growing impasse, avoiding his companion's eyes as he did so. "So you, uh..." he began vaguely. Until suddenly he seemed to hit upon an idea. "Hey Satch, do ya ever like to drink? Alcohol, I mean."

"Alcohol...? Me..." Satch wasn't sure that he was ready to give up his judgmental posture just yet, though given the sound of that word. That magic word! "Yeah, I drink sometimes," he said in as cool and collected a voice as he could muster, feeling the need to maintain some sense of wounded pride despite the miracle cure which had just occurred.

"Well, I was just figurin' that what with the two of us bein' stuck out here for awhile, maybe we could..."

As Gary spoke, the last of Satch's reserve seemed to vanish, and he felt his eyes being drawn inexorably toward the grocery bag. Staring at it greedily. Hungrily. Thirstily.

With such eagerness that Gary couldn't help but notice. "Oh, I don't got it on me, man. All I got in there is a water bottle cause I don't got a canteen or anything like that. But I saw this place back when I was in town..."

"Yeah? Back in town?" Come on man, get on with it, Satch wanted to say. Just spit it out and say what ya got to say.

"Yeah, so I was figurin' that maybe there's time to go back there and get us a bottle or somethin' before the next train..."

"The next train? Ah, don't worry about that, cause ya got all sorts-a time," Satch blurted out. "There ain't nothin' gonna be comin' through here till... till... I don't know when." He

caught himself at the last moment, thinking better than to reveal too much information all at once.

“Do I? I got time?”

“Yeah sure, ya got lotsa time. I’m sure ya do, and uh... Yeah, I’ll share the bottle with ya when ya get back.” Of course I will!! I’ll share it in that man-to-man way that you just offered it, that friend-to-friend way. And when it comes to all that stuff about my name, all that... What was it? I can’t quite remember anymore.

“So whatta ya say? Ya wanta come with me?”

“Come with ya? Come to that...? No man, I don’t think I should,” Satch replied after a quick mulling-over. The thought of a dirty and disreputable-looking black man like him walking into a liquor store in a little hick town like that, walking in with some oversized white guy by his side and scaring the living shit outa those... “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Though Gary heading off by himself to buy a bottle? That was a fantastic idea. The best idea that Satch had heard in a long, long time. And his mouth was already starting to water as he watched his new friend go walking off in the direction of the liquor store. His nerves tingling and his senses on edge at the prospect of the cheap, rotgut wine which he would soon be drinking. That elixir. That nectar of the gods.

So wound up all at once that it wasn’t until after his friend had disappeared from sight that the first suspicions ever began to assail his mind. Suspicions that the guy might have been playing him all along. That he might not be coming back, might abandon him out there with his thirst all worked up into high gear. Playing such a cruel and dirty trick... But then as Satch glanced down at the spot where the big guy had been sitting, he noticed that the little seabag was still there, having been left behind without a word as though Gary trusted implicitly that he wouldn’t steal it. Wouldn’t run off and sell it for the price of a bottle in the way that some wino would. Because obviously the guy could tell that he wasn’t that type of person. He could tell that Satch was a good person deep inside. Very deep inside.

And as it turned out, Gary was a good person as well, because it wasn’t long before he made his reappearance, walking along jauntily with a brand new paper bag cradled in one arm. A bag filled with liquid treasure! A bag whose inner beauty shone so brilliantly that Satch couldn’t take his eyes off it as it made its slow but steady approach, the bag along with its owner. Swaying gently as it drew nearer and nearer all the time. That gorgeous little bag. That... That bag which, as he looked at it more closely, appeared to be much too small to contain a bottle of wine, or at least not one that was big enough for two grown men to share. So that instead there would only be enough in there for a taste, enough to whet his appetite and make him want more and more... And it wasn’t until after the bag had made its triumphal entry into the jungle that Satch’s fears and doubts were finally vanquished. Not until after the bag’s owner had reached inside it with a flourish and pulled out a bottle that didn’t contain wine of any type in any amount, not the Mad Dog 20/20 that he had been expecting and not any of its cousins either. But instead as Gary held the bottle up before him, Satch saw that it contained something that was

even better than wine. Much better. He saw that what the guy was holding up was a bottle of Bourbon. Real Bourbon! Whiskey!!

Oh, what a wonderful sight it was! More beautiful than anything he had seen in months. Years. Because when was the last time he had been able to afford something like that? It had been so long ago that he couldn't even remember. The last time he had owned a bottle like that. The last time he had so much as seen one close up. A real, live bottle of whiskey!

Satch was barely aware of the words as Gary said something to the effect of, "I hope ya like it." His attention much too focused upon the golden liquid before him. And then when the moment came for him to hold that bottle in his very own hands, the moment to take his first sip, suddenly the magic was upon him. The whiskey was going straight to his head and taking him directly to that happy place, that drunk place. It was sending him straight into that other world where he loved to be.

That world in which everything looks so much better than it does in the sober world, cheap hotel rooms becoming palaces and ugly women becoming beauties and losers becoming winners. A king in his case, or at least a prince, as the whiskey made its way through his system, and as everything that he saw kept looking better all the time. Even that half-assed excuse for a jungle where they sat, that bare-bones little campsite on the edge of a small-time railway yard, which somehow magically grew more beautiful with each sip he took. Even it seemed to be evolving into something else altogether. Into a garden spot, a small earthly paradise. And it wasn't a lonely paradise either, not when for once he had someone there to share it with him. Gary, a guy who was starting to look better all the time as well, cooler and more hip, though not in that white-guy-acting-black kind of way. No, he was cool in a white-guy kind of way, which was good enough for now. Good enough to play companion to road-royalty such as him.

As the Bourbon steadily loosened his tongue, Satch no longer had any inhibitions about talking openly with his new friend, and he was suddenly willing to talk about anything. Almost anything. As long as it didn't involve himself or his past, that is. As long as it didn't involve Grandpa or his mother or Jacki and the kids or the life he had led before or the places he had lived or the jobs he had held. Anything but that. And luckily for him, Gary turned out to be a guy who didn't ask questions about another person's past, which made it easy for him to avoid those uncomfortable subjects and stick with more pleasant ones instead. Subjects such as the weather and trains and winos, and of course music. Especially music. Gary being ready to talk about all types of music, it seemed, whether good music or bad—funk or country—and he was even willing to talk about punk rock. Anything but disco.

And so the two of them went on and on about music as they worked their way through the bottle together, passing it back and forth and taking sips. Gulps. They talked until they seemed to have exhausted the subject completely, the conversation slowly fading away until finally it settled into an extended lull. A growing silence which was only broken when Gary switched gears all at once and started in on a sea-story, followed by another and then another. He told about funny incidents and described some of the strange and unusual people he had met during his sea-going career. And as he talked, he dropped the names of exotic places located all over the world, describing his adventures in Africa and Asia and South America. You name it, he seemed to have been there.

Telling his stories in an open and unpretentious way, though with something so infectious about the quiet passion, the understated ardor with which he spoke, that it wasn't long before it began to work its way into Satch's consciousness, his ever more unguarded and inebriated consciousness. Worming its way in so slowly yet so stealthily, so unobserved, that almost unaware of what he was doing, Satch suddenly found himself starting out on a sea-story of his own. A story from back in his Navy days which he hadn't told to anyone in years. Not since that day with Grandpa.

Grandpa!! Satch could practically see the old man before his eyes as he spoke, sitting there listening with that look of joy on his face, that childlike enthusiasm. It was all so clear, so vivid as to make it hard for him to concentrate on what he was saying. Hard to control his voice and keep it from choking up. Hard to... "Ah, fuck it! I forget the rest of it," he said all at once, cutting off his story half-told. And then reaching for the bottle, he took another big shot of his medicine, his cure-all. Another big blast of forgetting.

As Satch sank into silence, his eyes cast downward, he heard not a sound from his companion as though the big guy were staring at him, trying to size things up and figure out what had just happened. And it wasn't until after that brooding silence had gone on for minutes, many minutes, threatening to settle in permanently upon their once happy little home, that Gary finally spoke up like one spurred into action. "Hey, that's James Brown," he said pointing at the radio. Changing the subject back to something safe. Back to music. Back to the present. And he said not another word after that about the sea or the past in any form, not his own past and not that of anyone else, as instead all his talk was about the music that he heard coming over the radio. Commenting upon it and coaxing his friend's thoughts back toward happier things. Toward funk and soul. Toward the drunken here and now.

Toward that place of oblivion. No past and no future, only that beautiful little bottle which was steadily washing away everything else, gulp after gulp. Reviving Satch's spirits and sending them floating back up little by little, drop by drop. All the way up to where he had been before, beyond where he had been.

And so as the two of them sat there draining the last of the bottle, sometimes they talked about music while at other times they just listened to the songs and grooved to them, even sang along with a few. Satch singing in that terrible voice of his while Gary's was hardly any better, though who cared when it was only the two of them out there. Who cared? Until finally with the fall of night, with the bottle gone but not forgotten, Satch felt an urge to get up and take things all the way to the next level. To pull out the stops altogether and start making a little music of his own in the near total darkness that enveloped them, it not being a good idea to build a fire and call even more attention to themselves than what they were already doing with their music. So that turning off the radio all at once, Satch reached into his pocket and pulled out the worn and banged-up harmonica which he had come across a few weeks earlier. Pulled it out and, after looking it over as best he could in the dark, he put the thing up to his mouth to play. For the first time ever in front of an audience. He raised the rusty old thing up and held it in musician's position, ready to go even though he had no idea what he was doing. No idea how to get any sort of melody out of it, so that as he began to blow-and-suck, it sounded more like he was playing a drum than anything else. Making music that came out as pure rhythm. Tum-ta-ta-tum-ta-tum-ta-tum-tum.

“Hey, that’s great!” said Gary at the end of the first number, if you could call it that. With such exuberance in his voice, such unfeigned enthusiasm, that Satch soon had the instrument back up to his mouth for a second number, not to mention a third and a fourth. Getting ever more deeply into his performance as he went along and putting ever more feeling into his songs. Playing them with more body-English all the time as well, until finally he was up on his feet altogether, dancing and stomping around, soon to be joined by Gary. The two of them hopping and prancing about and kicking up their feet. Dancing around the cold fire-pit in their dark little jungle like a couple of wildmen.

Gary grunting or clapping along with the music from time to time, trying to keep up even as Satch’s rhythms grew more and more complex. Clapping along and cheering at the end of each of the so-called songs. And then before the evening was over, the big guy was to give Satch what had to be the greatest compliment that he had ever heard in his life. Ever! Gary shaking his head in wonder as he raved, “Man, I never saw anyone could play one-a them things the way you do.”

Not anyone! Anywhere in the world. Because Satch was the best! He was number one. The musical star that he had always known he would be someday.

NORTH? WEST?

The world didn’t look so beautiful anymore as Satch opened his eyes the next morning. Not that the hangover was bothering him. No, it was a good hangover that he had that morning, a whiskey hangover rather than a cheap wine one, on top of which it came from having spent one of the best evenings of his life. The evening of his first great musical triumph. So the hangover couldn’t have been the problem. No, it had to be something else. It had to be...

It had to be the fact that everything looked so normal to him that morning. So goddamned normal! Exactly the same as it had been the day before and the day before that and the day before that. The jungle where he lay looked as barren and uninviting as ever, nothing but dirt and rocks and grass and a log or two. And as he glanced over at his audience of the previous night, sound asleep a short distance away, he saw nothing special about the guy anymore. All he saw was some big, oversized white guy laying there with no blankets or anything. No bedding of any kind, just a coat which he had pulled out of his seabag and put on, and meanwhile he was using that little bag for a pillow.

Satch didn’t know what to do about a reality as depressing as the one he saw before him, what besides roll over and try to get a little more sleep. Try to escape that sad life of his for a few minutes more. And so closing his eyes, he did his best to shut the world back out, and he refused to budge even when he heard the big guy get up from where he lay a short time later. Get up and walk over to take a pee into the bushes before returning to the cold fire-pit where he sat quietly, making not a sound as he waited for his friend to join him, evidently. Something which Satch had no intention of doing anytime soon if he could help it. If he could just get back to sleep for a little while longer.

“Good morning,” said Gary in a much too cheerful tone when Satch finally gave up his efforts and threw his blankets off, rising to face the day.

He grunted in reply, wondering what could be so goddamned good about it and wondering how it was possible that the guy seemed to have no hangover whatsoever. None. After all the whiskey he had put away the night before. Because rather than moaning and groaning and complaining about how he felt, he was sitting there reading a book and smiling away. Smiling! On a day like today.

After a quick visit to the bushes, as Satch sat digging out cigarette butts from his stash and emptying them into a rolling paper, getting ready for his first smoke of the day, he heard the big guy speak up all at once with a hint of urgency in his voice. Like he just couldn’t hold it in any longer. “There ain’t anyone workin’ around here in this yard, is there? Anyone I could ask about... You know.”

“Don’t look like it,” Satch mumbled back, not mentioning the fact that it was exactly for that reason that he had chosen to stick around in that town. Nobody poking around and bothering him, and no winos sneaking around either, trying to attack him in the night or trying to rip him off...

“So I wonder where I could like... You know, who I could ask about when there’s gonna be a train comin’ through here. Ya know?” Gary paused as Satch licked the rolling paper and sealed it up before sticking the cigarette into his mouth and lighting it. “Cause like last night, ya told me that train comin’ through was goin’ the wrong direction, and then with them others that came by later on... Well, I didn’t feel like gettin’ up and runnin’ after em, ya know. Not in the dark I didn’t, and especially not when I didn’t know where they’re goin’ or anything. But now with it bein’ daylight and all that, and me bein’ ready to get on my way, I figure that like... You know...”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. There’s a train ya can catch gonna be comin’ through here pretty soon.”

“Yeah, really? There’s gonna be...? How d’ya know that, man?” Gary sounded a bit skeptical.

“I just know it is all,” said Satch in an end-of-subject tone, not ready to go into the details just yet. Not so early in the morning, and especially not before he had finished his first cigarette of the day or had a single cup of coffee. So he said nothing more as he picked up some of the sticks and pieces of paper which he had gathered the day before and began to build a small fire in the pit. One just big enough to boil up a pot of coffee. And as he worked in silence, Gary held his peace as well.

For a little while, anyway. Until he just had to pipe up again. “So ya say there’s gonna be a train comin’ through here, huh?”

“Yeah, pretty soon,” Satch said sharply. “In a little while.” And then he continued with his work, filling his battered old cooking pot with water from his canteen before adding coffee grounds and setting the mixture on the fire to boil.

“Hey man, if ya wanta go get somethin’ to eat in a café in town or somethin’ like that...”

“No!”

“No...? Cause like all I got with me’s a little fruit and some granola, so I was thinkin’ that maybe we should...”

“No, I tell ya. Ya don’t got time for none-a that shit man, cause your train’s gonna be comin’ through here. So all ya got time for is to drink some-a this coffee right here.”

“Some-a this...? Oh hey, thanks, man.”

Satch didn’t acknowledge the gratitude, but instead he went on with his work, removing the dark-brown brew from the fire once it had boiled for a decent length of time and then sprinkling a little cold water onto it so as to make the grounds sink to the bottom. Making his coffee hobo-style even though he wasn’t a hobo. And finally he poured some of it into his dark-stained metal cup, the only one he had so that the two of them would have to share it.

He gave the cup to Gary who took a sip before handing it back, and then as Satch took his first sip of the day, strong and bitter and oh-so-satisfying, suddenly he began to feel human once again. Almost human. So much more alive that by the time he had finished his third sip, he was ready to re-open the conversation without prompting. “Okay, so here it is, man. Your train’s gonna be comin’ through here pretty soon, headin’ up north where ya can...”

“North? But I’m goin’ west.”

“Yeah, that’s right. But these trains around here don’t go that way, so ya gotta head up north first before ya can go west.”

“North and then west?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“North, huh...? And then west...”

Satch said nothing back as his friend sat staring at the tiny fire, letting the information sink in. Because as yet he hadn’t had enough coffee to be able to hold any type of sustained conversation, and he certainly hadn’t had enough to be giving out major explanations. Telling what he had learned about the trains and their schedules from that young railroad worker he had spoken with a few days earlier. About the northbounds and the westbounds that would take Gary out to where he wanted to go. Out into cowboy country. Country music country, which was a place that Satch had no intention of going himself. Not with him being a black man and that part of the country being so white.

“So I gotta go north, huh? I gotta...?” Gary sounded like he needed a bit more reassurance as the two of them worked on a second cup of coffee.

“Yeah, that’s right. Ya gotta catch a train goin’ up to _____,” Satch answered, giving the name of a major city and railroad junction that lay a few hours to the north, “and then from there, they got trains that go all the way west.”

“A train up to _____, huh? And ya say there’s one gonna be comin’ by here pretty soon?”

“Yeah, pretty soon.”

“So okay, then. I guess I better get ready to go, huh? I better...”

“Yeah, that’s right. Ya better get ready.” Satch didn’t know why it was that the sound of those words affected him so deeply when he heard them. Why they sent such a wave of sadness washing through him. And as he sat working on what was left of the coffee, Gary having refused his latest offer of the cup, he felt hesitant about looking up at his friend as the guy got to his feet and did what little packing he had to do. And then once Gary had finished stuffing his things into the seabag and tying it up, when he came over and stood there as though to say goodbye—or perhaps thank you, good luck—Satch kept his eyes glued upon the dying remnants of the fire before him.

Because the very thought of making eye contact with the guy at a moment like that! Looking him in the eye and saying goodbye and then... Oh, how the hell do you say goodbye to someone, anyway? How do you say it to a friend? The first friend he had made since he didn’t know when, and that friend who was about to disappear from his life forever. About to walk away never to be seen by him again, leaving nothing behind but that loneliness. That misery. That... Though what other choice did he have when the guy was on his way to a place that he didn’t want to go? What else could he do but avoid eye contact at all costs? Because if ever he were to look the guy in the eye. Even if just for a second. Even for one little...

Ah, what the hell! “Hey, wait for me,” Satch heard himself say all at once. His decision made though he knew not how. Or why. “I gotta get all my shit together, man, and I gotta... I’ll show ya where we can catch it, okay?” We! He had just said the word we, hadn’t he? That word which he had almost forgotten even existed over the last few months.

Satch quickly set about doing everything that he had to do in order to get ready, knowing how little time there was. He stamped out the last of the fire and dumped the dregs of the coffee onto it, and he made a quick trip to a little shed near the yard where he used a faucet to refill his canteen. And then after rolling up his blankets with all his gear inside them and tying the bundle up, he motioned to his friend before leading the way over to a small group of boxcars that sat on a siding. A group which he had been told was to be picked up by that morning’s train.

The two of them were soon walking up and down the short line of cars until they found an empty one with the doors open on both sides, just in case. Crawled inside and made their way up to one end where they would be inconspicuous as they waited for the ride to begin. And there they sat in silence, listening to the sounds outside while holding off on any breakfast preparations by a sort of unspoken agreement.

And as it turned out, they didn’t have long to wait before the sounds of the northbound train struck their ears, pulling into the yard and slowing down, slowing down until finally it came

to a stop on the track next to theirs. Some of the cars left sitting where they were after that, while further ahead they could hear the rest of the train as it started back up moments later. Started and stopped, started and stopped somewhere off in the distance. Until all at once, wham! they felt themselves being thrown to one side as their car was shunted this way, and wham! they were bounced the other way as their car was shunted back, and wham! This way and that way, bracing themselves each time for the next shock until finally the train began to move smoothly at last. Moving in one direction and one direction only, and slowly gathering speed as it resumed its journey to the north.

Gary went over to sit by the door as soon as they were clear of the yard, and for some reason Satch decided to join him. Satch who normally preferred to keep a low profile when he traveled, but who on this occasion decided to abandon his usual caution and sit right out in the open instead, as big as life in that open doorway. Sitting there where he could watch the world go by through that huge, glassless window of theirs, and where he could actually enjoy the ride for the first time.

Because there was something about sharing the experience that day that made it all so much more pleasant than it had ever been before. The scenery more beautiful, the hills and farms and lakes and towns looking so much prettier now than he had ever seen them, so much more inviting. And even the breakfast which the two of them shared that morning tasted better than it had any right to, Satch offering some of his peanut butter and crackers to Gary while the big guy offered him granola in exchange. That along with an orange, a second piece of fruit which Satch soon stowed away with the apple he had been given the day before, both of them remaining uneaten.

As they sat looking out, the two of them spoke to one another from time to time, spoke above the rhythmic clanking of the big steel wheels. They told jokes or made observations about the things they saw, or they held their peace if they preferred. Whatever felt right at the moment. Gary evidently knowing better by then than to start in on any more of his sea-stories, so that the ride was as smooth and calm as could be.

All of it except that one moment, that is. That moment when Gary suddenly came out with a question that Satch was completely unprepared for. When at the end of a description of his plans for the near future, his plans to beat his way clear across the plains and then over the Rocky Mountains, he turned to his friend and asked, "So how bout you? Where're ya goin' exactly?"

"Me?" Satch hadn't seen that one coming at all, and he had no idea what answer to give. Because earlier he had been thinking that he would probably be heading south sooner or later, but now here he was heading north. So then where was he going exactly? Where? "Oh, I'm just..." he started to mumble.

"Are ya headin' out west like me? Is that why you're goin' this way now?"

"West...? Yeah..." Hey, wait a minute. What was he saying?

"So how far ya goin' that way? Ya goin' clear out to...?"

“Me? I’m...” Satch didn’t know what to say, having just discovered himself that he was on his way to the west, and he needed a little time to think about what there could possibly be out in that direction. What destination he could possibly name, short of the coast. Until all at once, a phrase that he had heard from an old hobo some time back came popping into his head. “Me, I’m goin’ out there to pick potatoes.”

“Potatoes...?”

“Yeah, potatoes.” It sounded like a crazy idea to him as well, though given the fact that potato country lay somewhere out in the direction that Gary was heading, it might just serve his purpose. A good excuse for him to tag along with the guy for the next week or so. Until they got to potato country, that is. At which point he would have to come up with a new story. Because the idea of actually picking potatoes? Man, that was way too much work for him!

For now, though, it seemed that his decision had been made, and there was nothing to do but to go through with it. Those potatoes which he had just mentioned had become his sweet potatoes all at once, and as of now, they were officially in the ground. They had been planted, and there could be no turning back. Nothing but to continue moving ahead and playing the role of a future potato-picker as he accompanied his big friend into the west, changing trains with him when they reached the big junction up ahead and then chasing the setting sun. With no second thoughts and no regrets, because good decision or bad, it had now been made, and there was nothing to do but to live with it. To sit back and enjoy the ride as they made their way toward the junction.

That big junction which Satch had nearly forgotten all about as he sat enjoying the scenery. That big railway yard and the big city surrounding it, which was the exact type of place that he had been doing his best to avoid over the last few months. The type of place in which all the bad things associated with life on the road seemed to be so heavily concentrated, the dangers multiplying and the lowlifes congregating. So that as the signs grew ever more clear that they were nearing the end of the present leg of their journey, he felt a growing sense of unease at what lay ahead. The two of them riding right into the middle of a big yard like that, the biggest yard in that whole part of the country. Oh, he didn’t like the idea of doing something like that. He didn’t like it one little bit.

Because wouldn’t it be better if they were to play it safe? To get out early and then scout the place out on foot. Wouldn’t that be a whole lot better? “Hey, I tell ya what, man. Why don’t we jump out as soon as she’s goin’ slow enough, okay? Then we can walk the last part, case there’s any bulls or any... you know.”

Gary was soon convinced of the wisdom of the plan, so that once the train had reached a reasonable speed, the two of them were jumping out and making their way on foot. Setting out on what could have been a pleasant little midday stroll if not for the fact that it took them through such an unpleasant world. Through the dark and forbidding post-industrial wasteland that bordered the approach to the yard, an area filled with dilapidated and largely abandoned buildings. Empty buildings and half-empty lots where buildings had once stood. Deserted except for the employees of the few companies that still remained in business around there, while any

other decent people avoided the place at all costs, whether from fear or disgust. Avoided that ugly world into which only the lowest of the low ever ventured voluntarily.

The bums and the losers—and the two of them. Though despite the eeriness of their surroundings, Satch strode along without fear. Because somehow the knowledge that for once he wasn't alone, that he had a friend walking beside him now, made the whole thing seem so much less threatening than it otherwise would have been. And not only did he have a friend with him, but he had one who had to be the biggest and strongest guy in that whole damned town. Bar none. And what with Satch being the meanest and the toughest, that made the two of them into a pretty formidable pair. A couple of guys you had better not mess with if you knew what was good for you. So keep out of the way, all you winos and thugs and thieves, he wanted to yell. Cause we're comin' through, and we ain't gonna take no bullshit. So watch out! This place is ours, and we're not...

Hey, wait a minute. What's that? Satch interrupted his train of thought all at once as he came jerking to a halt at a sight that caught his eye. The sight of a cigarette butt laying in the street before him. A big butt, half a cigarette's worth damn near. And here he hadn't even noticed it until the very last second! So that as he bent over to pick the thing up and add it to his stash, suddenly he was asking himself what he could possibly have been thinking about a moment before. How he could have almost missed seeing something like that. Because where were his priorities, anyway? Walking along thinking about stupid things like happiness and contentment and friendship when he should have been keeping his eyes open. Should have been watching for important things, valuable things like cigarette butts, not to mention pieces of scrap metal or aluminum cans or bottles that he could turn in for a deposit. So wake up, he said to himself. Wake up!

As the two of them drew near the yard with its multiple tracks and railway cars sitting about here and there, Satch noticed a number of workers hanging around. And looking them over, he soon picked out one who seemed like a likely candidate, a young, hip-looking guy with long hair. A good person for him to approach and talk to and pick up what information he could in the way that he always did when entering a new town, talking to railway workers or the occasional old-time hobo, anyone who might serve as a source of knowledge. Though the thing about those conversations of his was that whenever he talked to one of them, he always treated them as information sources and nothing more. He never spoke to them as friends or potential friends, keeping them at arm's length instead, in the same way that he did with everyone else he had met in those days, that world. Everyone but Gary.

And speaking of Gary, as Satch surveyed the situation, he soon became convinced of the wisdom of sending him over there to talk to the guy rather than going himself. Gary who was young and white and hip, more-or-less, the same as the railway worker appeared to be. So that rather than having some beat-up-looking black man like him go over there—and rather than having the two of them go walking around the yard together, drawing attention to themselves—the smartest thing to do would be to send Gary over by himself. Without his bag or any other sign that he was on the road.

And so it was with that thought in mind that Satch began to look around on all sides of them, soon picking out a good spot in which to hide out. A quiet spot within the skeletal remains

of an old abandoned building where moments later he was taking a seat, with the seabag and his own bedroll at his side as he settled in to wait while Gary went off to perform his mission. Off to find out what he could about the next train heading west, hopefully one that would be leaving some time before dark. Because Satch had no desire to be stuck in a big city like that at night, trying to get by on its hostile streets. He had already done more than enough of that back in the days before he set out on the road, and he had no intention of ever doing it again if he could help it. If he could just get a train out of there before dark, out into open country and away from that goddamned city.

So Satch wanted to get moving, and he wanted to move now. But then as he sat waiting for his friend, Gary seemed to take forever to perform that simple little errand. Taking way more time than was needed to ask a couple of questions about the trains. And Satch's impatience grew and grew as the wait seemed to drag on forever. Come on man, he mumbled to himself after a while. Come on. What's keepin' ya? How long does it take to ask a couple-a questions? How long? He was up on his feet before too much longer, walking over to peer around the corner and then walking back, over and back, trying to see if the guy was coming at last. Pacing and complaining in silence as his guts churned with impatience. As suspicions of abandonment crept into his head, only to be allayed by the occasional glance at that seabag. Until finally Gary reappeared, finally he came sauntering along as casual as could be. Finally!

"Shit man, there ya are!" Satch's nerves spoke for him.

"Yeah, hi. I was just..."

"So what'd he tell ya, man? When's the next train goin' west?"

"Well I tell ya what, man. Larry over there says that like... He says that me, I'd be better off if I was to go over and get me a ride on the Milwaukee Road, cause like..."

"The Milwaukee Road!?" What the hell was he talking about? That wasn't what he had gone over there to ask about.

"Yeah, cause like he says that over there, they got these fast trains runnin' all the way to the coast. Straight on through. And he says that they can get ya there in like... You know, like a couple-a days or somethin'."

"All the way to the coast? Man, that ain't what we're lookin' for." Satch already knew about the Milwaukee Road, of course. About the rattler they had that crossed the northern part of the country with hardly a stop along the way. "That ain't where *I'm* goin', man. And you, I thought ya said ya wasn't in no hurry. So I don't know why the fuck ya'd wanta go gettin' on that line."

"Well, that's just what Larry said..."

"Man, that ain't what we're lookin' for. We wanta stay on this line right here and take our time gettin' there. Don't ya remember?" Gary eventually reaching the coast while Satch would be heading somewhere else once the two of them had split up. Heading off in whatever direction he chose to go, whether that be west or south or returning to the east. Wherever he

chose to... “Hey wait a minute, man. How’d that guy know ya was goin’ all the way to the coast, anyway? Did ya go and tell him about it or what?”

“Yeah,” Gary responded innocently.

Ma-a-an, what was going on with this guy? Running around telling his whole life-story to some yardworker when all he had to do was to ask a couple of simple questions. Find out about the next westbound train, which was something that he evidently hadn’t gotten around to doing. “Shit man, we can’t use none-a that shit he told ya. Cause we wanta stay right here on this line. We don’t wanta go runnin’ over to no Milwaukee Road. So shit man, I guess that means I gotta go over there and ax em...”

“Oh, on this line? Is that all ya wanted to know about? Well in that case, Larry says there’s gonna be one leavin’ outa here later on today. He says they’re gettin’ it all ready right now, and it’s gonna be leavin’ in somethin’ like two, three hours.”

“Two hours?” Now why the hell didn’t ya just come out and say so in the first place? Satch wanted to ask. And as he looked his big friend over, he wondered what could be going on with that guy, anyway. Whether he was stupid or just plain friendly. Too damned friendly! Telling yardworkers about things that they had no need to know, things that it was always better to keep to yourself.

“Yeah, Larry says they’re makin’ it up over there on, uh... Track three, I think it was. Or maybe four. Somethin’ like that...”

“Three or four? Ya don’t know which one?”

“It’s one-a them two, I’m sure of it. I just don’t remember like... exactly, ya know. But don’t worry about it man, cause I can recognize it once we get over there.”

“Recognize it? How? Cause it’s got railroad cars on it?”

“Yeah...”

Oh, Jesus! What was Satch getting himself into by riding along with a guy like this? What had he been thinking when he decided to... No, wait a minute, this was no time for him to be having second thoughts. Because his decision had been made, hadn’t it? His sweet potatoes were in the ground, so there was no going back on it now, nothing to do but to go along and go through with it. And if that meant that they would be getting themselves lost a few times along the way, then so be it.

“Hey ya know what man, we oughta go get ourselves some food,” Gary broke the silence before it could gain momentum. “Cause we got a couple-a hours here, right? And me, I don’t got much of anything to eat, so I figured that maybe we oughta... You know, we could go out lookin’ for a store or somethin’.”

“Right, a store,” Satch said without enthusiasm, knowing that he already had enough food with him to last for the next day or two. And since he didn’t have enough money right then to

buy a bottle—something to feed the inner man—he wasn't all that sure that he wanted to go along. Walking around town and exposing himself to rousts by the police. Or worse. Though if Gary was so damned set on going, then he supposed that he would have to tag along.

Before setting out, though, they would have to find a place to stash their bags, not wanting to call undue attention to themselves by wandering the streets with bedrolls and seabags in their arms. They would have to find a place where their things would be safe from the prying eyes of any winos or other losers who might be skulking around that area. A place like...

Satch didn't know why it was that he felt his eyes being drawn all at once toward a spot over on the far side of the ruins within which he had just spent so many long minutes waiting. A spot which in reality didn't fit his prescription at all, being the very first place that any wino was bound to look: a small pit that gave the impression of having once provided access to something below ground. Such an obvious hiding place that he would never consider leaving the bags there, though still there was something about it that had caught his attention right from the beginning. Something about its very obviousness, perhaps. Something which had piqued his curiosity, aroused some instinct deep within him. So that now as he got ready to make a move, the first thought that came to mind was to go over and check the place out.

Go over and drop down into the pit where Satch was soon rummaging around and moving the debris inside it this way and that. Until before long he found that he had uncovered a small chamber of some sort in one of the walls. A chamber which, as he bent down to look inside, revealed a sight that sent a thrill running through him. "Hey man, look at this!" he yelled in excitement as he reached in and pulled out two examples of what he had just discovered, holding them up for his friend to see. Two big, beautiful pieces of scrap metal. And not just any old pieces of metal either. No, they were the high-class stuff that he had found. Brass and copper, pieces of heavy-gauge wire just behind them. The valuable stuff. Hobo gold! And from what he was able to see, there must have been enough of them in that pit for him to go out and buy himself three bottles of wine with the proceeds from their sale. Four bottles. Five. With maybe even a little money left over for food.

"What the hell is that?" Gary asked in that innocent voice of his.

"It's treasure, man! Buried treasure!!"

Gary didn't respond to the phrase right away, standing instead with an uncomprehending expression on his face as he glanced back and forth between the scraps and his friend's face. A clear sign that it was up to Satch to explain the situation to him further. "It's money, man! Sittin' right here in this hole. Just sittin' there! And all we gotta do is take it."

"But doesn't it belong to someone?"

"Yeah, me! It belongs to me... To us! Cause we found it, didn't we? So now it's ours."

"Are ya sure?"

"A course!" Didn't this guy know how things worked out there on the road? Didn't he know that it was strictly finders-keepers? You take it, and it's yours! Didn't he...? No, maybe he

didn't given the look of deep-seated doubt that came over his face in reply. That look which seemed to question the logic and justice and every other aspect of Satch's line of reasoning. That look which was so penetrating as to begin raising doubts even in Satch's own mind, leave him feeling hesitant, uncertain how to proceed. Knowing damned well that he couldn't just walk away and leave all that money sitting there. All those bottles of wine! But if at the same time any effort on his part to salvage it and take it to a scrap metal dealer in town was going to be met with such obvious disapproval from his friend, then he didn't know what he would have to do.

What besides stand indecisive in the pit where he was, looking at the treasure below him and glancing up at the friend above from time to time. In a complete quandary. Until all at once Gary's voice broke the stalemate for him. "Hey man, I don't know about you, but I'm gonna go out and find me that store."

"That store...?" Satch had forgotten all about that, so it took him a moment to compose his thoughts and respond, finally throwing out the word, "Okay." Because of course he would go along. He would stick with his friend for now, coming back later to deal with the other stuff once he'd had time to think things over a bit. Time to come up with a plan.

Before leaving, Satch wanted to cover his tracks as best he could, so he tried to put everything back exactly where he had found it, the scrap metal back in the little chamber and the debris where it had been before. Hoping to leave the impression that no one had been there. Because he didn't want some thief to come along and take it while they were gone, did he? Steal his treasure. *His* treasure! That treasure which he had to preserve, he just had to. In one way or another.

Once he was clear of the pit, the two of them soon found a good, inconspicuous place to hide their bags, and then after a short walk, they came upon a convenience store. A little place inside which Gary looked around with disappointment on his face, searching in vain for something healthy to eat, evidently, while Satch on the other hand was perfectly content to invest his money in good old American food. Chili and the like. And his only moment of doubt came as he walked past the wine section, those rows of cheap wines sitting right there on the shelves. So near and yet so far since all his newfound wealth lay back in that pit, unexploited. All that perfectly good scrap metal just sitting there in a place where it did him no good at all, while in the meantime he would be forced to go without. Forced to go dry for the rest of the day and that night and who knew how much longer.

That's it! Satch said to himself as he tore his eyes away from the tempting display. He wasn't going to put up with that bullshit any longer. He was going to grab as much of that stuff as he could carry with him once he got back there, take it along as he hopped a train and then sell it in the next town he came to. And if Gary complained? If he walked off and put an end to that budding friendship of theirs? Tough shit! Because friendship versus money? Booze!?

There was only one choice that he could make, Satch knew as the two of them began the walk back, as they recovered their bags unharmed. Only one thing that a guy like him could do in face of an opportunity like that. Money, booze, happiness. All the things that make life worth living, he was practically singing to himself as they drew near the abandoned building, humming and whistling inside. When suddenly he felt a jolt of alarm, his guts rising into his throat at the

sight of a wino up ahead, running out of the building all at once. Fleeing like a guilty man, like he had just been poking around inside there or something. Trying to make off with the treasure! With Satch's treasure!! The source of his near-future happiness.

Satch felt his muscles go tight in an instant, urging him to take off after the guy or at least to run over to the pit and check things out. But then before he could act, he heard Gary's voice. Gary who evidently took the sight of the wino in a whole different light as he said calmly, "Hey, I wonder if that's the guy that stuff belongs to."

"Belongs to!?" Satch shot back in disbelief. "It don't belong to no one, man. It belongs to me! Cause I'm the one who found it. Remember?"

"Yeah, but what if that guy...? I mean, what if he's the one who put it in there?"

"Put it in there? Man, that don't mean nothin'."

"But I mean like, what if all that stuff's his, man? What if he hid it in there and like...? I mean, then we'd be stealin' it, ya know."

"Stealin'? From a wino!?" Now the guy had gone completely off the deep end. "Shit man, there ain't no such thing as that! Cause ya can't steal from them assholes. Ya can't!! Cause they ain't got nothin' to steal from em, man. Nothin' but shit they already stole themselves. Cause they're like... Man, it ain't stealin' if it's a wino. It can't be. Not with winos."

He paused momentarily in his tirade only to be met with silence on Gary's part, the big guy staring off in the direction in which the wino had gone and avoiding his friend's eyes, so that Satch soon felt himself compelled to go on. Compelled to say something more that would hopefully get through to the guy at last. Teach him a few things about the realities of life on the road. "Man them winos, they're about the lowest fuckin' thing there is. So low that they ain't even human. Dirty and smelly like a bunch-a fuckin' animals. And dangerous, too. Cause man, ya ever turn your back on one-a them assholes, look out! Cause he's gonna stab ya, man. Right there! Right in the back."

As Satch paused for a reply once again, still Gary said nothing back, looking off into the distance and then at the ground. Until finally just as Satch was about to give up and be on his way, the big guy muttered a quiet, "Man, it just ain't right."

"It ain't right!?" he shouted back, bothered not so much by the words as he was by the tone in which they had been spoken. By the guy's air of moral superiority, his quiet self-righteousness. That was the thing that hit him right where he lived, got him worked up in a way that he hadn't been worked up in a long, long time. Because the very idea of his behavior being questioned in that way. His morality! The idea of judgment being passed upon him by some guy who had no right to judge. Some guy who had only been on the road for something like a day by then, so that he had no idea what it took for a person to get by out there. Not a clue. But still there he was, pushing that goddamned middle-class-white-guy morality of his onto *him*. Onto a poor black man who had nothing going for him and had to get by in any way that he could. Because the nerve of that guy! The nerve!!

“I tell ya, man. Winos ain’t got no fuckin’ rights. None!” Satch pronounced the words with an end-of-discussion finality as he turned and stomped off. Not looking back and not caring whether the big guy followed him or not. Paying him no heed whatsoever as he made his way directly toward the treasure. Off to dig it up and take it with him no matter what the guy had to say. And to take all of it, too! Just to show him.

Satch was relieved to find that the treasure was still right where he had left it as he dropped back down into the pit and began to rummage through the debris. All the brass and copper and wire. And then as he began to pull it out one piece after another, he kept on going even after he knew that he should have stopped, knew that it was going to be a struggle to carry so much with him all by himself. With no help from that so-called friend. Though what other choice did he have but to do the whole thing alone? he grumbled to himself as he unrolled his blankets beside the pit and piled the pieces of metal up at one end of them. Pulled out the box of crackers and the radio and other delicate items which had previously been there and put them into the grocery bag which he now had with him. That bag which he would have to carry along as well, its contents added to rather than emptied out as he had planned. Have to do this thing the hard way, he muttered, since he had so much scrap metal to carry and no help whatsoever.

So much metal that the rope he used to tie up his bedroll barely reached all the way around the thing, leaving the loop in the middle so short that there would be no way for him to sling it over his shoulder and bear the weight there like he usually did. But instead he would have to carry that whole big, heavy load with his arms alone. With both arms, the bundle being much too heavy to handle with one. So heavy that it was going to be a struggle to lift and carry it even with two arms, and especially so when he had to grab onto the top of that grocery bag at the same time and hold it dangling below. But as difficult as it was going to be, still he wasn’t going to ask for help from that opinionated asshole who was with him. He wasn’t going to say another word to the guy, leave it to him to follow along if he wanted or to head out on his own. Because Satch didn’t care about friendship any longer. Not when his survival was at stake—that along with all those bottles of wine. So he could take the guy or he could leave him. He didn’t care either way.

And meanwhile Gary, who had followed him meekly to the pit, stood mute as he watched his friend pack. Hesitating as though he were in a struggle with his conscience, trying to make up his mind on what to do next, how to react to what he saw. And all the while he was being ignored by Satch who had much more important things on his mind at the time. Things like grappling with that oversized burden of his, that unwieldy bundle which he finally managed to lift after a lot of huffing and puffing, finally managed to begin lugging off in the direction of the railyard. Moving ever so slowly and without so much as a look in Gary’s direction as he went, since as far as he was concerned, the decision was entirely up to that guy. The decision on whether to come along or to stay there. Whether to follow along half-heartedly as the big guy did in the end, walking a few steps behind his much more decisive friend.

Behind Satch who made his way with such difficulty under the huge weight that he was carrying, fighting for every step he took and wondering how he would ever be able to make it all the way through the railyard while wrestling something like that along with him. How he would be able to go all the way to...

Zip! Suddenly something flew past his head a few feet away. A rock it must have been. And then, Zip! there came another.

Satch dropped his heavy bundle onto the ground and turned to see where those rocks could have come from. And looking back toward the abandoned building, he saw a wino standing there in the distance. Probably the same one he had seen earlier, though it was hard to tell since all winos look alike. And the next thing he knew, the guy was winding up and letting fly with another rock in his direction. "Hey!" he shouted out.

"You fuckin' thieves! You put that stuff back!!" the wino yelled at him. "That stuff's mine and you can't have it!"

Satch didn't glance over at the big guy who had stopped beside him, already aware of the see-what-I-told-ya! expression which he was sure to find on that face. Though at least the guy said nothing about it out loud. At least he kept his mouth shut as Satch picked up a rock and flung it back at the wino, coming a lot closer to his target than the other guy had ever done.

"You fuckin' nigger!! You gimme back my stuff!" the wino shouted while making no move to throw another rock, as though he wanted to prevent things from escalating any further in that direction. His new attacks coming strictly from his mouth. "You nigger! You goddamned fuckin' nigger!!"

Satch didn't fall for the guy's strategy, though, picking up a second rock and throwing it rather than going verbal himself. And this time his throw was right on target, had the guy not jumped out of the way in time. But then as he reached down to get the ammunition for a third try, he saw that Gary was getting involved in this thing all at once, stepping over so that he stood right in the way, right in the line of fire. Holding up his hands in a stop-what-you're-doing gesture while he spoke in a calm, gentle voice, "Hey, hold on, man. This ain't gonna work. He's too far away for that shit. It's not gonna do any good."

Not gonna do any good!? What the fuck was he talking about? Anything that you do against one of them racist assholes does some type of good, even if it's only to remind him what an asshole he is. And while he was on the subject of assholes, what about that big, smug, moralistic asshole who was standing there in front of him now? What about letting that guy know exactly what he thought of him? "Ya hear that?" he shouted right into the big guy's face. "Ya hear that racist fuckin' scumbag? That asshole you're tryin' to protect. Ya hear what he's really like? Yellin' all that racist shit. Cause I tell ya man, them winos ain't even human. They don't deserve to fuckin' live!"

"Yeah, you're right, man. You're fuckin' well right about that guy, cause he sure as hell is an asshole."

"Yeah. A course I'm right!" Satch didn't know what more to say at the moment since he hadn't been expecting that sort of reaction at all. He hadn't been expecting the guy to agree with him. "A course I'm right..."

"Yeah, man. But ya know the thing is, we gotta come up with some good way-a dealin' with him. Some smart way," Gary went on as calmly as ever, while off in the distance the wino

continued his verbal assault. His repetitive and unimaginative racist rant. "Cause we can't go throwin' rocks at him from this distance, and we can't go chasin' him all over town. And we sure as hell don't want him followin' us all the way into the yard when we go there, yellin' all that shit and stirrin' things up."

"Yeah, that's true man, so we... Hey, how bout if we try circlin' around him, huh? One of us goin' over that way and the other..."

"Nah, that's no good, man. It ain't gonna work cause he'll see it comin'."

"Ya think so...?"

"Yeah, he'd just... Hey, wait a minute! I got an idea. I know exactly how we can take care-a this shit."

When the big guy said it, he suddenly sounded so sure of himself that Satch didn't know how to respond. He wasn't used to hearing that sort of resolute tone come out of the guy's mouth. He was much more accustomed to the old go-along-get-along stuff. And so he didn't know what to say back besides, "Yeah, how?"

"Yeah, sure as shit, man," Gary went on as though he hadn't heard the question. "And ya just gotta trust me on this one, okay?" he added with even more authority in his voice than before. And then with no further explanation, suddenly he turned and yelled to the wino. "Hey you! Ya wanta get your stuff back?"

Get his stuff back? Satch didn't like the sound of those words at all. He didn't like anything about this plan so far. Because didn't the guy realize that what he was talking about was *his* stuff now? Satch's stuff. All that stuff that he wanted to give away! And as far as the wino's initial reaction to the plan was concerned, he offered nothing but a skeptical silence.

"I tell ya what, man. Ya can have it back right here and now, but only half of it. Ya got that? Ya can have half!" Gary went on.

"Half!? I don't want no fuckin' half. I want it all, cause it's all mine!" the wino voiced his opinion of the plan at last.

"No, you're wrong! It ain't yours anymore cause ya lost it, man. But we're willin' to give ya half of it right now. Ya can have that much just to put an end to this shit. So take it or leave it, man. Half of it or none!"

The wino clearly didn't like the offer, and it was hard to tell from the tone of his voice whether he truly believed in the viability of his own counter-offer or not. His, "Gimme all of it!" A position to which he clung tenaciously over the next several minutes, refusing each and every offer of a compromise. Or rather refusing each repetition of the same old offer.

And there was no telling how long that standoff might have gone on if not for the moment when Gary whispered to his friend all at once to make a physical gesture that would hopefully break the logjam. Telling him in that brand-new no-kidding tone of his to open the

bundle and start giving stuff back, one piece at a time. Making a suggestion—or perhaps it was an order—which Satch soon found himself obeying for he knew not what reason. Found himself unrolling his blankets and then reaching into the pile of metal and pulling out one of the pieces, the biggest and heaviest piece that he had though one that didn't contain very high-grade metal. And then with that piece in his hand, he held it up and waved it about for the wino to see before tossing it a short distance away.

The wino fell silent the moment he saw what was happening, and he continued to watch without a word as Satch did the same thing with a second piece of metal and a loop of wire. Pulling out all the lowest grade stuff that he had while counting on the fact that the wino was too far away to be able to tell. And then once he had built up a nice, impressive-looking little pile for the guy to keep, a pile which consisted of somewhat less than half when it came to weight—and significantly less when it came to value—Satch re-rolled his blankets with the remaining pieces inside. All the high-grade stuff. And as he re-tied the bundle, he found that now there was plenty of loop left in the middle of the rope for him to sling the thing over his shoulder and take the weight off his arms, making the going a whole lot easier than what it had been before. His luggage far more manageable now as the two of them got back on their way to the yard. And as they went, they found that their departure was met with utter silence on the part of the wino. The guy's failure to speak or complain being taken by the two friends as a signal of his final acceptance of the deal. His signature, his seal.

Hey, ya know what? This guy ain't so stupid after all, Satch said to himself as he walked along. Cause that plan of his got the wino off our backs, didn't it? And the only thing it cost me was some of the junk. Some of the cheap stuff that wasn't hardly worth carrying around anyway. So that in a way, I'm actually better off now than I was before. I'm carrying a lot less weight, though I can still make plenty of money out of it. So that maybe the guy knows what he's doing after all. Maybe he's got something going on upstairs.

Though which side is the guy on? The thought came to him all at once. Where does he stand exactly? Because there he was at first, giving me hell for wanting to take the stuff, but then the next thing I know, he's turning around and helping me get away with it. Get away with the best part of it, anyway. So what the hell game is he playing? And whose side is he playing it on?

When they reached the yard at last, it turned out that Gary knew exactly which train they had to take heading west. It turned out that he wasn't so stupid on that score either, and that he wouldn't be getting them lost after all. At least not for now.

FROM JUNGLE TO JUNGLE

Once their new train was clear of the yard, Gary went over to sit in the doorway of the boxcar they had chosen. Just like he had done before. And also like before, Satch soon went over to join him, to sit in that big open doorway where he could watch the scenery outside, the towns and the farms and the countryside. And as he did so now, he no longer felt the least qualm, the least fear of being seen, as though somehow he enjoyed the same white-man's-immunity that his companion did. As though some of that immunity must have rubbed off onto him by then,

leaving him invulnerable to arrests and hassles—as long as he stuck with his white friend, that is. As long as he followed along with him.

Or wait a minute. Did he just say followed along? Did he just admit that over the course of that day, he had somehow been converted into a follower? That he, Satch, who had always been such a leader—a leader without any followers—had fallen to the status of a follower all at once. A guy who was not only willing to follow his friend off to a part of the country which he had never before had any desire to see or any plans to visit, off to cowboy country, but on top of that he was going there white-man-style. Sitting right out in the open like he owned the place. Like he had every right in the world to be doing exactly what he was doing.

As they made their way along on the first leg of their journey to the west, the going turned out to be quite a bit slower than what it had been before, the train coming to a stop one time after another. Every few miles, it must have been. Stopping to let other trains go by or to wait until the signals changed or for who knew what other reasons. And so with the slow progress that they were making, they hadn't covered very much ground before darkness fell, the long summer evening coming to an end while the train continued on its way, trudging along ever so slowly toward the west. Starting and stopping, starting and stopping.

Satch left his post at the door not long after it had grown too dark to see anything outside other than the occasional light. He retired to the end of the car where he laid back and tried to get some rest, and where he did his best to ignore everything that went on around him. Tried to get what sleep he could until all at once during one of their frequent halts, he was roused by Gary's call. "Hey man, look at this."

Satch quickly got up and went to the door to see what was happening, and then as he poked his head outside, suddenly his eyes were met by one of the most beautiful sights that a man can see: the sight of a liquor store, all lit up with neon lights and sitting right there. Right there! Not more than a few steps away on the road that ran along next to the tracks. So near and yet so far. And when the train began to back up all at once, evidently in the process of picking up a few cars or dropping some off so that they would be there for the next several minutes, Satch felt such an ache, such a sense of longing fill his breast that he couldn't help but give voice to his emotions. "Man, will ya look at that. There it is just sittin' there, and me sittin' over here with no fuckin' money. All that good shit I got to sell, but not a fuckin'..."

Gary's response to the words was immediate, mumbled though they may have been. In a tone so low that only the final, louder phrase ever reached Satch's ears. "Hey man, ya want me to go over there and get us a bottle?"

"A bottle...?" Yes! Yes!! Of course he wanted a bottle! Though he wasn't sure how to say so without begging. "If ya want..."

"Yeah, sure thing," said Gary as he jumped out. No problem, he would be right back. And with that, he took off running in the direction of the store. Toward that little piece of paradise, that lovely beacon in an otherwise dark and lonely world.

But then no sooner had Gary entered the store than the train began to move once again. And it didn't just move a little bit either, but instead it did so like it was the real thing, that short

backward jog having been nothing but a fake, evidently. Because now as the train began to move forward, it did so in a steady and decided way. Taking off for the west and leaving the big guy behind!

“Run!” Satch yelled into the darkness even though he knew that Gary couldn’t hear him, as far away as he already was. “Run, man! Run!!”

It was impossible for him to see what was going on back there, impossible to see if his friend was running along the tracks or not. There was no sign of him in the glow of the neon lights, and everywhere else it was too dark to see a thing, so that as they slowly gathered speed, Satch was soon forced to give up hope. Forced to admit to himself that he wouldn’t be seeing the big guy come charging up and jumping back into that car of theirs, not with the speed they were going by then. So that the only chance the guy had left would be to catch the train somewhere further back. Somewhere too far back for Satch to see, most likely.

Well shit, man. That idea didn’t work out so good, did it? he said to himself. Cause now here I am, my friend gone and the bottle, too. That bottle, that... Oh man, it was so close back there that I could damn near taste it.

Satch knew that there was nothing for him to do right then but to wait for the next stop, at which point Gary would be able to make his way back up to their car. Because as foolish and innocent as the guy may have seemed sometimes, surely he wasn’t stupid enough to have missed the train altogether. Surely he would have known enough to catch it somewhere toward the rear, so that the only thing left for Satch to do was to sit back and wait for the train to come to another halt, at which point his friend would be able to rejoin him at last. His two friends, hopefully, the big guy and a bottle of something good to drink.

Though as it turned out, there was one slight glitch in this latest plan of his, that being the fact that on this occasion when the train started to move, it kept right on going. It didn’t stop a few miles up the track in the way that it had been doing up until then, but instead it went on for twice the distance it had ever gone, three times the distance. Like the damned thing was never going to stop again, rolling on and on for mile after mile after mile.

Until suddenly Satch heard Gary’s voice yelling at him. “Hey man, is this it? Are ya in this one?”

“Yeah man, that’s right!” Satch yelled back. “But where the fuck are you?”

“Look up.”

Look up? What the hell was he talking about? Up...? Satch asked as he turned his eyes in that direction. Turned them toward the upper part of the doorways where he thought he could make out something over on one side. A head sticking out against the dark sky, it appeared to be. Gary’s head! “Man, what the fuck you doin’ up there?”

“Just cruisin’ along, man.” Gary’s voice sounded calm and confident despite the precariousness of his position.

And when Satch heard that reply, he couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Shit, man! You fuckin' crazy! You gotta be the craziest motherfucker I ever met."

"Yeah, that's me."

"So how the fuck ya get to this car, anyway? Ya been jumpin' around up there on top-a them cars or what?"

"Yeah."

"In the dark? In the fuckin' dark!? Jumpin' around up there like ya was in some fuckin' movie or somethin'?" Satch was having trouble wrapping his mind around it.

"Ah, it was easy, man... Cept for them tank cars, a course," Gary threw out casually.

"Tank cars!? What the fuck...?"

"Yeah, them tank cars, ya know. Cause with them things, man, they're not easy to jump onto. And me, I had to like... Man, there was three of em I had to jump over."

"Three!?"

"Or maybe it was five."

"Or twenty!" Satch caught onto the joke at last. And then after a good long laugh, he added, "Man, you the worst fuckin' liar I ever seen. Cause them fuckin' tank cars..."

"Hey man, ya want a drink?" Gary interrupted him all at once. "Ya want the bottle?"

The bottle? Of course he wanted it. What did the guy think?

But then before he knew what was happening, he heard Gary yell, "Here, catch!" while reaching out with something in his hand. With the bottle! That bottle which he was about to throw down from up there where he was!! Satch could hardly believe his eyes, the guy about to throw the bottle all that distance while they were bouncing around on a moving train. In the dark! About to toss that precious little bottle to its certain doom!!

No!! Don't do it! Satch wanted to yell as fear stabbed his heart, filled his head with visions of impending disaster. Of the bottle being smashed into a million pieces and all that lovely liquid seeping into the floor of the boxcar. So that if only he could have said something in time to stop the guy... But no! The next thing he knew, it was coming at him, the bottle flying through the air against the dark background. So dark that he quickly lost sight of it, a fleeting shadow in a world of shadows. So dark that the only thing to do was to reach out his hands and hope for the best—and pray as fast as he could. Because he had to catch that thing before it was smashed to bits. He just had to. He couldn't let it... All at once he felt the bottle hit his hands, and instinctively he cradled it against him as gently as he could, scooped it in and pressed it up against his chest. And then as he stood holding the thing safely in his grasp, daring to breathe

again at last, the thrill that shot through his body was incredible, fantastic. The greatest thrill of his life. The touchdown catch that won the Super Bowl!!

Oh man, how much of this shit can I take? Satch asked himself as he clutched the prize, afraid to loosen his grip even to examine it. How many more games? How many more near disasters? He didn't know. The only thing he knew for certain was that he needed a drink, and he needed a big one. Enough to soothe his jangled nerves. And so relaxing his death-grip at last, he raised the precious thing up in front of him, held it against the dark background outside the doorway to discover that it was yet another bottle of whiskey. Another great big bottle of the good stuff!

He was soon reaching to unscrew the cap, finding in the process that it had already been opened before. As though his friend must have taken a shot—or several good shots—of whiskey before embarking upon his train-top odyssey.

Something to which the guy readily admitted when asked by Satch a few moments later. “Yeah, a course I had some fore I started jumpin’ around up here. Cause what the fuck ya think I am, man? Ya think I’m crazy enough to do this shit stone-sober?”

The train finally came to a stop a few miles further up the tracks. And when Gary climbed down to join his friend and get another shot at the bottle, he was truly wound up and ready to party. Ready to drink and howl at the moon, ready to whoop and dance and have a good old time. And it wasn't long before he began to insist that Satch get out his harmonica and play them a tune. Or more correctly, that he play them a rhythm since that was the only thing Satch was capable of doing with that mouth-harp of his.

But Satch was hesitant to get the thing out at first, afraid that he might not live up to his standards of the previous night. Or maybe he was afraid that with all the distractions out there, all the motion and noise, all the clanking of the wheels, he wouldn't be able to get into the music in the way that he should. Afraid that he would let down not only his friend but himself as well. And so it came as a happy surprise when he finally caved in and agreed to make the attempt, to put the thing up to his mouth and begin blowing-and-sucking away, only to discover that rather than distract him, the rhythm of the wheels actually sent his own rhythms up to whole new heights. That they made him sound even better than before as he played along with a group for the first time ever. With a second rhythm section backing him up. Tum-ta-ta-tum-clank-clank-ta-ta-tum-clank-clank.

It was somewhere around midday the next day when they finally pulled into a good-sized yard, with not only a number of loose cars sitting around here and there, but also with a half-built train or two over on some of the other tracks. Obviously a junction, Satch said to himself as he glanced around discreetly from his perch by the door. One in which that slow-moving train of theirs was bound to be broken up and remade before continuing on, so that without even bothering to look for yard workers or anyone else to ask, he motioned to his friend that it was time for them to get out and get going.

Because he could use a break by now. He really wasn't a long-distance guy when it came to the trains. He was a guy who preferred to make short hops instead, having no particular place

to go and plenty of time to get there. And when he saw the expression of relief that appeared on Gary's face, how willingly he jumped down from the train, he knew that the guy must have been ready for a change of pace as well.

Only too glad to follow along as Satch led the way down a narrow little path which his well-developed instincts had pointed out to him, up and over a small rise and then on to their destination. On to the local jungle which soon proved to be one of the finest that he had ever seen. With plenty of room for the two of them to stretch out, not to mention the big fire-pit surrounded by smooth, comfortable-looking logs, one of which even had a back-piece propped up against it. A piece so big as to make that seat into something of a hobo throne. And to make things even better, there wasn't a single wino in sight. Not one of them. Anywhere. As far as the eye could see.

Oh man, this is too good to be true, Satch said to himself as he stood looking the place over. And from what he had been able to see of the town off in the distance, he thought that it might be one of the best he had seen as well. Not too big but not so small that a stranger would stick out like a sore thumb. So that in other words, the town was just about perfect. And if it turned out that there was a scrap metal dealer somewhere around there—and a liquor store as well—why then Satch's happiness would be complete. He would be able to turn all that deadweight he was carrying into money. Into booze! And maybe even a little food, if there was anything left over.

Gary volunteered to go back to the yard and make the necessary inquiries as Satch set to work building a fire and brewing up a pot of coffee. Showing that by that time he had learned what his white-guy role was in that little expedition of theirs. And then when he returned many minutes later to eat lunch and help drink the coffee, he was full of information, telling about two trains that would be leaving for the west at different times during the next day and two others leaving the day after that. Though as he spoke, he said not a word about any trains leaving that same day or the coming night, nothing about the one which had brought them there. Because just like Satch, it was clear that Gary had no desire to continue on so soon.

Once they had finished their lunch, Satch's first order of business was to locate a scrap metal dealer in town. When he brought up the subject to his friend, however, there was an immediate parting of the ways, Gary making it clear that he would have nothing to do with the metal or its sale. That he wouldn't be going along into town since he didn't want to see the transaction take place. And in fact, he didn't want to know anything about it, coming right out at one point to tell Satch that he should take the stuff with him when he went to scout out the town. That Gary wouldn't so much as stand guard over it until he came back to get it. Nothing. As though the stuff were dirty somehow. As though it were ill-gotten gains.

Well fuck him, Satch said to himself as he lugged the stuff away and looked for a place to hide it while he went searching for a dealer. While he set out to explore that town which, much to his surprise, turned out to have almost nothing cowboy about it in spite of the fact that it lay far out on the Great Plains. No cowboy hats or cowboy boots or cowboy attitudes. But instead what he found there were farmers. Wheat farmers and the like. Good, hardworking people who grew what they needed right out of the soil, just like what his Grandpa used to do. People among whom Satch would have felt right at home had it not been for the fact that they were all so white.

The fact that the only music they listened to was country music, as he was to find to his displeasure when he got around to trying out his little radio.

Satch returned to the jungle an hour or two later after having accomplished his mission, carrying a bottle of liquid treasure cradled in one arm. The first of several bottles which the sale of his other treasure would allow him to buy over the next few days. And his spirits were high and his thirst well ripened as he hastened back toward his new home, ready to crack the bottle open and begin the celebration of his good fortune. But then just as he was making his final approach to the jungle, all at once he saw that his friend wasn't alone as he should have been. That he wasn't sitting there by himself, but instead he had some other guy with him. Some wino he had evidently invited to join him in Satch's absence. A wino! Sitting right there in that jungle. In Satch's jungle!

"What the fuck's he doin' here?" he blurted at Gary as he made his entrance, unsure whether to be angry at the guy or just disappointed.

"Hey, hi there, Satch," Gary responded in such a casual tone as to make it appear that he was unaware of—or at least unconcerned about—Satch's opinion. "Welcome back."

"I asked ya what the fuck he's doin' here."

"Oh, him? He's, uh... Hey, this here's Rube. He's a..."

"I can see what the fuck he is." Satch knew a wino when he saw one, and he didn't need anyone telling him what the guy was.

"Yeah man, he's a good guy. A real good guy," Gary went on as though he still didn't get it. As though he still failed to see anything wrong with what he had done. "And man, he's been all over this country around here. Like everywhere ya can think of. And he's been tellin' me all sorts-a good shit."

Now how can you be angry at a guy like that? Satch asked himself. A guy who was so damned good-hearted, though so goddamned naïve. And it wasn't that this Rube character looked like such a bad sort. More hobo than wino, had he taken the time to notice. Because if anything, the guy appeared to be the cleanest and best groomed person among the three of them in that jungle. And while he may have been an old-timer, he gave the impression of being one who took care of himself to some extent rather than being the all-out loser that most of them are. A guy who may even have been on the road by choice rather than necessity, been there because he liked it rather than being there because he had nowhere else to go.

But still, it was the principle of the thing that counted. It was the principle! "Ya know I don't want no winos comin' around here, don't ya?" he interrupted Gary as the guy continued to sing Rube's praises.

"Oh, Rube's no wino," Gary came leaping to the old guy's defense. "Why, he doesn't even drink or anything."

“Doesn’t drink!?” Who ever heard of a wino who didn’t drink? So of course he drank. Of course he did.

Though as the conversation went on, Satch couldn’t seem to convince Gary of that fact. Couldn’t convince him that all winos are a bunch of liars and drunks. All of them. Including that Rube character who sat there trying to avoid the hard looks being directed his way, Satch staring at him steadily, insistently, as though to drive him away through sheer will-power, or at least to bring out the truth at last in that lying wino scumbag.

And he continued to stare even as he took a seat, the throne-seat which evidently neither of the others had dared to occupy previously. Neither of them brave enough to proclaim himself the king of that little jungle in the way that Satch now did unhesitatingly. The king of the whole damned road if he wanted to be. And as he leaned back in what he hoped was a regal pose, he tried to come up with some way to put an end to the situation, some way to clean up that jungle of his and get rid of the riffraff. Because the very idea of spending the night with some wino hanging around! And even if this particular guy didn’t look like the type who would come sneaking up on him in the middle of the night, still he was a wino. Still he was the lowest thing that there is on the road or anywhere else in the world. He was a loser, a complete loser. A guy who... Oh man, what was it with those winos? Drinking that cheap wine of theirs all the time like it was their whole damned lives or something. Like it was the only thing they had to live for.

Satch had to get rid of Rube as soon as he could. Some time before darkness fell and it came time to sleep. And in fact, he didn’t even want to break out that precious bottle of his until after the guy was gone since there was no way that he was going to share it with some wino. No fucking way! Because if the guy wanted a bottle, he could go out and buy his own. This one was Satch’s, and he wasn’t going to share it with anyone but those he chose. Anyone but Gary. And so in his hurry to get rid of the guy and get started with his drinking, he soon began to pull out all the stops, staring at the old wino with such blatant hostility that even Gary must have been able to see it. Giving the guy looks that were so belligerent, so aggressive, that he was left squirming ever more uncomfortably, practically getting up and leaving right then and there despite the friendly talk being directed his way by Gary.

But while Rube may have acted like he was about to leave at any moment, still he wouldn’t quite do so. He wouldn’t get up off his ass and get the hell out of there. Not until Satch decided to ratchet things up to the next level, that is. Not until he turned straight at the old fart and addressed his first direct words to him. His first words and his last, spoken in such a hard tone as to leave no doubt about their meaning. “Hey, ya gotta get outa here, don’t ya? Ya gotta catch yourself a train.”

After that, it was only a matter of minutes before Rube was gone, taking just enough time to say a proper goodbye to Gary. And then with the old guy’s departure, Satch was free at last to open his bottle of Mad-Dog, free to raise it to his lips and take his first big gulp. Muttering his own goodbye as it went down. His own, “Fuckin’ wino.”

“But I told ya man, he doesn’t drink,” Gary said as though still without a clue, as though he still failed to see what was so obvious to Satch.

“Shi-i-it, man...”

“Not like you do anyway, huh?” Gary added in a mildly chiding tone. “Not like me and you.”

“Man, don’t you go talkin’ bout me like that,” Satch came back harshly, wanting to bring the subject to an end. “Cause I ain’t no fuckin’ wino. Not me. And I ain’t ever gonna be a wino either, cause I can hold my liquor, man. I can hold my liquor.”

No more winos came around during the remainder of their three day stay in that town and that jungle, so that the issue never re-arose between them, their friendship rolling along smoothly in an out-of-sight-out-of-mind sort of way instead. With no questions about dealing with winos and none about leaders and followers either, since Gary ceded permanent possession of the throne-seat to Satch without a struggle. Didn’t compete with him on that or any other level. Didn’t challenge his status as self-declared king or do anything else to prevent their days in town from becoming days of peace and harmony. Days of sweeping things under the rug.

They would wander around town in the daytime, one or both of them at a time, visiting parks or the local library—anyplace that was free—and then in the evenings they would break out a bottle and drink their fill, Satch getting out his harmonica to give another of his concerts whenever the inspiration hit him. Whenever he was on enough of a Mad-Dog high. Though as for Gary, both his drinking and his enthusiasm for Satch’s music appeared to decline rather steadily during the time they spent in town. As though he couldn’t appreciate the music when sober, while at the same time he was starting to lose his taste for alcohol. For all alcohol or perhaps only for the cheap wine that Satch always bought, that rotgut which he paid for with money that Gary still seemed to think of as being tainted somehow.

And so it was thanks to their failure to discuss any of the issues between them that it wasn’t until the day they arrived at the next railway junction down the line that the question of dealing with winos ever came back up. Forced itself upon them with a vengeance on that day, in fact, a true vengeance. Because no sooner had they gotten off the train and made their way to the jungle late that afternoon than they found that the place was completely infested with winos. Not just one or two of them but a whole group of winos. Three, four, five. And the guys in this jungle weren’t any of those clean-cut, I-don’t-drink type of winos that Rube had been, but instead they were the real thing. Dirty and smelly and ignorant and repulsive. The absolute lowest of the low. The personification of everything that Satch hated—and feared.

Satch froze in his tracks the moment he saw them, ready to back off quietly before he was noticed. Ready to slink away. Until suddenly the thought struck him, Hey wait a minute. What the hell am I doing thinking about things like that? Coward thoughts when I should be acting like the king. The bossman of this or any other jungle that I choose. Any jungle that we choose, me and my posse.

“Get the fuck outa here!” he yelled all at once, a bit taken aback at his own aggressive tone. “Get out, you assholes!! Get outa here!”

As for the winos, though, they seemed completely unimpressed by what they heard, all of them turning their heads calmly to look him over and size him up. He and the big guy who had

come to a halt beside him. And they looked on without a word for many seconds, long seconds, without a move to obey the order, until finally one of them yelled back, “Who the fuck are you?” The words coming from a shriveled-up little guy in filthy clothes.

“I’m the guy who just told ya to get the fuck out!”

“No, you get out, ya fuckin’ nigger,” was the wino’s response. And then as he turned and said something to his friends, they all started to laugh. All of them. Laughing at Satch!

That can’t be, Satch said to himself as he repeated his order to the winos in a louder and more threatening tone, only to be met with still more laughter. The winos evidently feeling much too secure right then, safe in their numbers and the distance that separated them from their potential foes. So that the only way for him to move this thing forward would be to cut down on that distance, Satch quickly came to see. To begin advancing upon them, he and that friend of his who was big enough to take on the whole group by himself. Because between the two of them...

Or wait, what was Gary doing right then? The thought came to Satch all at once. Was he smiling and acting friendly in the way that he usually did, or was he playing the hard-ass? Was he standing there firm and tough, ready to back Satch’s play?

Turning to look, it was hard for him to tell exactly, seeing the big guy in profile as he did, though at least he could make out no sign of a smile on that face. Nothing but a serious expression of some sort instead. The expression of someone who was ready for anything, Satch hoped. “Okay blood, let’s go,” he said in a low, hard voice. “Let’s show them assholes.”

But Gary said nothing back. He didn’t even turn to look at his friend. He just stood there like a statue. So immobile that doubts quickly came flooding into Satch’s head. What’s going on? Is the guy gonna go for it or not? Is he gonna follow my lead? “Let’s go,” he repeated his command—his suggestion, his plea almost by now—before taking a first step forward. A first tentative, hesitating step, to be followed by a second and then a glance back over to see what his big friend was up to.

Whew, what a relief! Satch nearly said it aloud as he saw that Gary was indeed going along with him. Moving forward in a clenched-fist, decided sort of way, shoulder-to-shoulder and matching him step-for-step. And then as the winos saw that big, double-barreled threat coming at them so steadily, closing the gap between them in such an ominous way, with such forcefulness, such menace in their stride, suddenly the whole group seemed to freeze in place. They stopped their laughing as they gaped back in silence, none of them daring to answer when Satch repeated his order once again, “Get the fuck outa here!” None of them daring to say a word, not even the loud-mouth.

They just stared with stunned expressions on their faces, stared at what they had to realize was their impending doom, their near-term death and destruction and dismemberment. Until finally they flinched. One of them jumped up all of a sudden and began to gather his things, and soon the rest were doing the same. They were all packing up and getting ready to flee, and while they mumbled and grumbled among themselves as they did their work, they addressed not a word to the men who faced them. Not until after they had started on their way, started walking down the path leading out the far side of the jungle, only to stop and turn and burst out into a

chorus of, "Fuck you!" and, "Fuck you, nigger!" And of course they flipped multiple birds before they finally disappeared.

Once the two friends had occupied the now-vacant jungle, they sat in silence for some time as though they had nothing left to say to one another anymore. Satch kept glancing around, searching the surrounding bushes for signs of the winos trying to sneak back up on them, while Gary settled into a much more relaxed posture. Sitting back as though he hadn't a care in the world. And it was in a calm and untroubled voice that he finally broke the silence. "Man, you sure aren't very friendly to people sometimes, are ya?"

"Friendly? With a bunch-a winos?"

"With anyone, man. Like with... I mean, what about Rube? He wasn't a wino."

Wasn't a wino? What the hell was he talking about? Of course the guy was a wino. Or why else would he be out there on the road?

"He was a good guy, ya know," Gary soon continued when Satch failed to respond. "He was good people, man. Cause like me and you, we're not the only good people around here, ya know. There's other good people besides us."

"Us!? What the fuck you talkin' about, man? I ain't no good people. I'm an asshole. Didn't ya notice?"

"Nah, you're no asshole, man. You're good people. Ya just... Only thing is ya don't wanta let it out. That's all. Ya don't want anyone to know."

Don't want...? What the fuck was this guy talking about now?

Satch was sure that with so many winos around, there had to be buried treasure somewhere nearby. There had to be scrap metal or something else of value hidden near that jungle. There always was in a situation like that. But since it was already so late in the day when the two of them arrived, the long summer day so near its end, he knew that there wasn't time for him to make much of a search for it before dark. Nothing beyond a quick going-over, which meant that the real search would have to be put off until the next day.

Until after they had spent a night in that jungle. A night! An entire night!! Sitting right there in the open where the winos would be able to come sneaking back in and get them if they wanted to. Slithering around under cover of darkness, ready to rob them or kill them as they slept or to do who knew what else. The pair of sitting ducks that the two of them were going to be.

Satch hadn't thought about that back when he was chasing those guys away, now had he? He hadn't thought about revenge. Not until now as the sun began to set and the darkness came on, and as he felt the tension starting to grow within him, churning his innards and sucking his mouth dry, making him all too aware of his thirst. That thirst more intense than anything he had felt in years, so that if only he'd had something with him right then, something with which to quench that thirst, surely he would have drained it in a gulp. A bottle of Mad-Dog or anything else. Anything! Though unfortunately, he had nothing to drink. Not a drop, his money having run

low by then and his big friend having shown no interest in spending any of his own money on a bottle, so that he was going to have to face the looming peril completely on his own that night. Sober. Without the least chemical assistance, the least liquid fortification, as he took on that whole group of winos. Nothing but his wits to guide him. His seldom-used sober wits.

But he could do it, he told himself. He had to! He had to be prepared for those assholes when they came. Because he couldn't let them take him by surprise even if it meant that he would have to sit up all night long waiting for them to make their move. Waiting for... Waiting for them to fall into the trap which he would spring on them in response, he soon went on with resolve. Waiting to hit back at that bunch of lowlife losers with a surprise of his own.

And so he sat awake that evening long after his friend had gone off to sleep. He sat with his senses straining at the darkness for any sign of danger lurking nearby, straining at the near total silence of the night, trying to hear anything that might foretell an attack, any rustling of the bushes or any...

Hey! What was that? It sounded like a human voice that he heard all at once. Someone whispering out there in the dark somewhere. And no sooner had he heard it than Satch was on high alert. Wide awake and so painfully sober that his nerves were starting to tingle, begging him to do something to soothe them. Begging him to take a drink. Because if only he had something to calm him, to strengthen him.

Satch didn't dare to alert his friend or even to rise all the way to his feet as he began to make his move—his counter-move—knowing that the winos were sure to see him if he did. So instead he crept along almost on his hands and knees. Keeping himself as low as he could while moving off in the direction of the voices, and he was carrying a stick along with him which he had picked out earlier, ready to use it on those guys if he could just get the jump on them. Ready to beat the living shit out of them.

"Where is he? Ya see him?" he heard one of them whisper. "I don't know," said another nearby. Just off in that direction a little ways. Both of them. They were right over there.

All at once Satch was on his feet with the stick in the air. Running. Charging. Banzai, motherfucker! He was running and... Thunk!! Oof! What was that? And what am I doing on the ground? Eating dirt and... Thunk! Thunk! Help, these guys are killing me! Thunk! "He-e-elp..." Get em off me. Get em off me.

"You okay, man?" he heard Gary's voice as the beating came to an end at last, the winos chased off by his arrival.

Okay!? Do I look okay? Would I be lying here on my stomach like this if I was okay? "No, man. I'm... I'm hurt, man. I'm hurt bad."

Satch had taken a serious beating, and he knew it. And he just hoped that there was nothing broken as he lay where he had fallen, unable to get up. Too weak even to drag himself back to his blankets, so that if not for his friend's help, he probably would have died right there, right where he lay.

Because he needed the guy that night, needed someone to save his life, a friend to half-carry him back to the jungle and care for him there. And he needed the continuing attention which he was to receive during the long, slow days of his recovery, Gary playing both doctor and nurse since Satch refused his advice to go see a real doctor. And that's not to mention the way that the big guy played cook and bartender as well. Doing all the things that Satch was unable to do for himself right then, and being so generous with him, so giving.

Like for instance, there was that time during the first day of his convalescence when Gary informed him that he had indeed found a stash of scrap metal hidden on the outskirts of the jungle. A stash which he planned on selling and then giving all the proceeds to Satch since he claimed that it was rightfully his for some rather obscure reason. And on top of that, the guy went on to say that he would use nothing but his own money when he went to town a short time later to buy all the things that they were going to need: food and cigarettes, real cigarettes, along with "a bottle-a that wine ya like so much."

"Wine...? If ya... If that's what *you* want," Satch answered weakly, hoping that the guy would catch his meaning without having to come right out and ask him—beg him—for whiskey or some other high-class medicine.

"Yeah, okay," Gary responded in that vague, unreadable tone of his, perhaps having understood Satch's inference and perhaps not.

But then as the big guy got up and prepared to set out, suddenly Satch was struck by a frightening thought. One that was far more frightening than the idea of receiving a bottle of rotgut when he could have gotten whiskey instead, the purchase being made on the other guy's dime. He was struck by the thought of himself lying there helpless while his friend and protector was away. Completely defenseless, completely at the mercy of those winos should they decide to come back and finish the job on him.

When he spoke up to voice his concerns to Gary, however, it was only to be told, "Ah, ya don't gotta worry about them guys anymore. They won't be comin' back."

"They won't?"

"Nah, I went out and had a little, uh... I had a talk with em a while back, and they're, uh... They're gone, man. They're gone for good."

Oh, man! Satch owed that guy so much. So damned much! And his gratitude was immense as he lay on his blankets during those long, boring days, occasionally getting up to go hobbling around the jungle, though he mostly spent his time lying there doing nothing. Feeling sorry for himself. Because he appreciated everything that his friend was doing for him, appreciated it beyond expression. Appreciated it almost as much as he resented it.

The whole idea of his having become such an invalid as he was, of a strong man like him having fallen so far. A man who had once been such a dominant figure on the road, or at least one who had believed himself to be so, but who had now fallen all the way from king to hapless follower to weak and helpless dependent. Totally dependent upon his friend, that so-called friend who was slowly but surely turning him into a...

No, wait a minute. None of this was Gary's fault. Nothing that had happened had been caused by him, so there was no reason to resent him for it or to hold anything against him. Not when the only person to blame for what had happened was Satch himself, as he knew all too well. Because it was he alone who had gotten himself into this mess, walking into that stupid-ass trap in the way that he had. Walking into it like some rookie who had never been on the road a day in his life, never spent a night in a jungle and never had to deal with winos before. Because what had he been thinking that night? What the fuck had he been thinking? Falling for such a stupid, obvious trick as that and now getting himself so completely laid-up. So helpless and so... Oh, if only he could somehow go back there, take everything back and live that night one more time. If only he could... But no! He knew that things didn't work that way. Knew that he had no choice now but to live with the consequences of his mistake. To spend his days lying around with nothing to do, no way to do anything for himself and nothing to think about all day long but his own misery. His own self-pity.

Because self-pity! There was a faithful friend if ever Satch had met one. There was a companion even more dependable than Gary. And as his self-pity grew during the first day of healing and the second, that feeling of disgust with himself and his pitiful condition, he found it ever more difficult to think of anything else, and harder still to hold it all in. Harder to keep from giving voice to those nagging thoughts, those feelings. Harder to keep from letting them out for the whole world to hear, or at least for his big friend to hear.

Letting them out as he suddenly began to do during a moment of weakness late on the second day following the beating, at a time when the big guy sat on a log nearby. Pouring them out in his most pathetic voice, "What the fuck're ya doin' out here with me, anyway? I mean really. What the fuck're ya doin' hangin' out with someone like me?" Some loser. Some no-good, low-down...

"It's cause you're good people, man. I already told ya that." Gary spoke at his most innocent.

So that it was up to Satch to bring a little reality to the conversation. "Bullshit, man! Bullshit! Cause ya know that ain't fuckin' true. Ya know I ain't no good fuckin' people."

"Oh yes ya are, man. Ya just..."

"No I ain't, I tell ya. I ain't no good people. I'm a fuckin' asshole is what I am. I'm a fuckin' loser. I'm a..." Satch searched for some new insult to direct his own way, some new verbalization of his self-contempt, when all at once a different thought came into his head. One that came burrowing up from somewhere deep inside. A question which had long been eating away at his heart, his innermost being, without his outer being ever having acknowledged it before. "D'ya think a guy's a bad father just cause he ain't there for his kids? D'ya think he...?"

"I don't know, man," Gary's answer was quiet and serious. "I don't know."

"I mean, just cause he goes off and leaves em, does that make him...?" Satch didn't know how to finish.

And Gary acted as though he hardly knew how to respond. "I don't know, man. I guess it just... It all depends on why he left em, I s'pose."

Why he left em? What the hell did the guy want to know that for? Why did he want to go probing into details like that? "I don't know, man. He just left is all. He just left."

"Well in that case, I can't, uh... I mean, who can say?"

"Yeah, who can say?" Satch muttered as he began to pull back, aware all at once of how perilously close he had just come to revealing something about himself which he had no desire to reveal. Something about his private self that no one else had a need to know. Not Gary and not Jacki and not even the kids. Those kids who would one day... Oh, hell! Those kids were going to hate his guts for what he had done to them. There was no getting around that. They were going to hate him forever.

Satch made it a point after that day not to enter into any more heartfelt discussions, knowing how easily they can spin out of control, and instead he kept his self-pity tightly contained from there on out. Wallowing in it day and night while allowing not another word of it to escape his lips. Holding his silence on the subject just as Gary did, neither of them bringing it up again. Satch having little to say about anything at all, in fact, while the big guy kept his conversation focused on happy things over the next few days. On the warm, beautiful weather and the rosy future which he imagined for the two of them once Satch was back on his feet.

Once he was well enough to catch a train to the next railway junction down the line, as he was finally able to do after what seemed like an eternity of waiting and healing. Six days or so. He was able to get on a train that day, jumping off once they arrived at the junction and then heading for the local jungle. And it was just as they were making their approach to what would be their new home that suddenly Satch saw a Gary that he had never imagined before. An aggressive Gary that he would hardly have thought possible, the big guy charging out ahead of him to confront the couple of current residents hanging around the campsite. Yelling, "Hey you, get the fuck outa here!" in a tone that brooked no argument. "Get out and don't come back!"

Sending those winos on their way in an instant as they scrambled to get out, much too intimidated by the guy's size and his threatening attitude even to complain, let alone laying plans to come sneaking back later on. And in that way turning that new jungle of theirs into a decent place to live. A clean place. A safe place. Just as he must have been doing back at the last one, Satch came to realize all at once. He must have been going after any winos who dared to show their faces in the vicinity, hunting them down and chasing them off, maybe even roughing them up, to judge by the way he just went after those two.

Yes, that must have been it, Satch said to himself now. That would explain why I never saw a single wino anywhere around that jungle during the whole time we were there. Not with Gary standing guard, scaring off any of those assholes that he saw. Like for instance the ones he had that "talk" with back on the first day. Ran them the hell out of town, more likely. And then look at what he just did a minute ago. Because that's what he must have been doing all along, even if he never said anything about it.

And there was only one time during their stay in that new town when Satch ever saw his big friend relax his strict no-visitors policy, that being the day on which he allowed some young white kid to come walking into the jungle asking for something to eat and drink. He was a kid who must have been somewhere in his mid-teens, much too young to be drinking alcohol, though since laws of that sort don't apply in hobo-jungles, the two of them were glad to give him what he asked for. Give him a drink from the bottle which they had on hand at the time and some of the chili they were eating and then another drink, after which they sat back to listen as the alcohol did its work. As it loosened the kid's tongue and got him started rambling on in that open, enthusiastic way that so many kids of his age speak. Telling them the story of his life, his wild and crazy life so far for someone so young.

Because that kid was about as wild as they come, as wild as the west was once supposed to have been. He was a kid who was crazy-full of life, while at the same time he was completely without judgment or common sense. And as he talked and laughed and told his story, he did so with a dramatic flair almost beyond his years. He told about his troubles at school, about punching out the teacher, as always seems to be the case in stories of that sort, and he told about running away. He told about stealing a car to get out of town, one that he was barely old enough and big enough to drive, and one that he was forced to dump when it ran out of gas, stealing another car since he didn't have enough money to buy a tank of gas.

And it was when he got onto the subject of money and gasoline that the kid became especially animated in his story-telling, describing his first—and so far his last—attempt at a gas station holdup. Giving out the details as freely as could be, the embarrassing ones as readily as the more positive ones. He told about sneaking inside and trying to pull a quick snatch-and-run, only to be foiled when he couldn't get the cash register open, and he told about the attendant laughing at him when he stuck his hand into his pocket and pretended to have a gun, and he described the narrow escape that he made when the guy tried to grab hold of him.

At that point he paused for a moment as though hoping for a bit of advice from his two older and more experienced companions. Though since neither Satch nor Gary had ever held up a gas station before, neither of them had anything to offer. Nothing but silence as they sat waiting for him to go on. So that before long, the kid shrugged and resumed his story, telling them the further details of his odyssey. Telling about how he had been driving this way and that way, all over that part of the country, heading north and south and east and west and stealing new cars whenever the old ones ran low on gas. Driving all day and much of the nights and getting so little sleep that finally he had nodded off at the wheel when he was a short distance away from where they presently sat. He had run the car off the road and totaled it, which was the reason for his having shown up in the jungle in the way that he had. Broke and alone and on foot.

Satch laughed along with the kid as he heard the story, all those daring exploits by a kid who was too young and too stupid to know any better. And it wasn't until after the kid had finished talking about himself and begun to ask about the two of them, about where exactly they were going, that alarm bells began to go off in Satch's head. Because it was one thing to welcome a crazy kid like that into the jungle for a meal and a drink and a story, but it would be a whole different thing to have him come tagging along with them for days or weeks at a time. And so before Gary could speak up and give away their intentions, Satch quickly piped up with a question of his own. "What direction *you* headin'?"

“Me? I was goin’ east, but...”

“Oh, sorry. That ain’t us.”

“No? Well, I could always change, ya know, cause I can go anywhere I want to, ya know.”

“What, ya wanta go back toward where ya just stole that last car from?” The thought came to Satch almost as an inspiration. “Back to where ya gonna get yourself busted?”

“Yeah, he’s right about that,” Gary chimed in when the kid was slow to react. Gary who may have been playing along or may have been fooled himself. It was impossible to tell.

Though whatever the case may have been, with both the older and wiser men urging him on, it wasn’t long before the kid seemed to concede to the logic of their position. Convinced that rather than going along with them, he should jump a train heading in the opposite direction, heading east where he would be able to resume his car-stealing rampage in a town where the police weren’t looking for him. Somewhere far removed from the scenes of his previous crimes and far from the smashed-up evidence of his most recent one. That evidence which sat such a short distance away.

A short distance away!? And here they were in one of the first places that the police were likely to come looking for the culprit once they discovered that car. So what the hell were they thinking? The guilty party and his accomplices-after-the-fact sitting there doing nothing, like they were just waiting for the pigs to come charging in. Those pigs who would... You know, if there was anyone worse than a bunch of winos, it would be a bunch of pigs invading that jungle of his. A bunch of assholes with guns running around like they owned the place. Ordering people around and busting their chops and treating them like dirt. Hauling them in whether they’d had anything to do with the crime or not.

Satch knew that they should get out of that place before the assholes made their appearance. They should grab a westbound train, or at least they should look for some less conspicuous spot in which to camp. And in the meantime, they would have to put that kid on the very next eastbound. With a few dollars in his pocket, thanks to Gary, and with a, “Good luck,” from both of them as he set out to write the next chapter in what looked to be an exciting and eventful though probably not very long life. One filled with ups and downs and adventures and jail-sentences. The life of a modern-day western desperado.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: INTO THE SUNSET

What is it about the west that has always made it such fertile ground for the breeding of desperadoes? Almost as though they spring from the very soil, there having been so many of them over the years. From the hard-riding, hard-living outlaw groups of the frontier days to the hard-driving holdup men and women of a later generation. From the horse-thieves and cattle-rustlers of the early days to the car-thieves and cattle-rustlers of today. And from the romantic bandits and defenders of lost causes whose names still inspire respect and even awe to this day—

Joaquin Murieta, Jesse James, Billy the Kid—to the “good badmen” of the golden age of Hollywood, to their lesser known descendants of the modern day.

Lesser known because by now the whole thing has become so commonplace, so old-hat, that their fame seldom extends beyond the immediate range of their criminal activities. Hardly known in the next town, let alone the next state, so that the only way in which outsiders ever hear about them is when they happen to pass through the outlaws’ territory. Especially when they do so during their criminal heydays, as was the case with me when I once hitched my way through the very same part of the country as that in which the characters in the book find themselves at present, with perhaps the most significant difference between their journey and mine being the fact that I was there several years before them and the events being described. Back at a time when one of the most prolific desperadoes of the modern era was active in that area. Or more correctly, it was a time when a pair of desperadoes were active.

They were a pair whose exploits were on such a scale that surely their names would have inspired generations of school children and movie makers had they lived a hundred years earlier than they did. Though since they lived and operated in the late twentieth century, they were doomed to remain virtually unknown outside a small region of the west. Their names only recognized by those who lived in the immediate area or by the odd visitor such as myself, a hitchhiker passing through with hardly a stop along the way if I could help it. And I surely would have left the region in the same state of ignorance as that in which I had arrived had it not been for a radio broadcast which I happened to hear from the backseat of the car in which I rode. A broadcast detailing the latest on the manhunt for the pair.

It was a late-model muscle car that I was riding in that day, one that despite its relative youth looked as though it must have put in many hard miles. And the two men riding up front were friendly enough cowboy-types, though they were very much on the quiet and reserved side. A couple of guys who had so little to offer in the way of conversation that even the token they gave me as we cruised along was offered in near total silence. Nothing beyond a short set of instructions as we smoked it in some strange local style, with the dope being piled up on the side of a dented-in, flattened-out Coke can which had a few holes poked in it, and the smoke sucked in through the opening on the top of the can.

So all in all it was a pleasant enough ride I was getting that day, even if I spent most of my time staring out the window in silence. And things might have gone on in that same way for the entire length of the ride had it not been for the broadcast which I mentioned earlier, coming over the car radio all at once and providing us with a subject for conversation. “Ya ever hear-a them? The Jeffries brothers?” the man in the passenger seat turned to ask me once the news item had come to an end.

“No, I haven’t,” I admitted freely, a stranger to that region.

“No?” My inquisitor sounded a bit incredulous.

“So who are they?”

“Just a couple-a assholes!” the driver jumped in all at once in a forceful tone.

To which the passenger responded soothingly, “Nah, they ain’t no assholes. They just... They’re just a couple-a guys who like to make their own laws is all.”

After that, the man spent the next fifteen minutes or so telling me the story of those two brothers, being interrupted only by the occasional outburst of negativity from the driver or by my own periodic requests for further detail. And as he rambled on, he eventually provided me with enough information to where I was able to piece together a smooth and coherent story of the brothers’ career. One that may be based upon fact or upon the story-teller’s fantasies or upon my own limited understanding and faulty memory. Though whatever the case may be, it is the story which I am about to relate to you now. The story of a little known pair of modern-day western desperadoes: the Jeffries brothers.

It seems that the two of them grew up on a ranch in that part of the country, one on which their family had been struggling to eke out a living for several generations. They grew up hard under difficult conditions, as hard as the land on which they lived, tough and self-reliant and asking favors of no one. And since they also grew up patriotic, they were quick to answer their nation’s call when they heard that it wanted people to go fight for it in a place called Vietnam. Volunteering not only to go there, but to take on the hardest and most dangerous assignments they could get. Putting their country-boy toughness to work in small special forces units which operated in areas that were infested with the enemy.

Risking their lives for their country day after day, while at the same time and without their knowledge, that very country was letting them down. Or more precisely, a certain element within the country was letting them down and turning against them. And I’m not talking about the hippies or the anti-war protesters here since neither of those groups could be said even to have existed in the part of the country from which the two of them came, pro-war sentiment being nearly universal around there. But rather it was an element with a huge local presence that betrayed them in their absence. A local business conglomerate of some sort, the owner of stores and gas stations and even a savings and loan. One which I shall refer to as “Mutual Savings” in order to avoid any possible claims of defamation.

What Mutual Savings did to the brothers while they were fighting for their country in Vietnam was that it decided to foreclose on the family ranch, the herd having been decimated recently by a disease of some sort and their father having fallen ill as well, dying a short time later. And so it was thanks to the bank’s decision to seize their land that when the brothers finally made it back to what they had always thought of as home, it was only to find that there was nothing left anymore, no home to come back to and no family, either. Nothing beyond a grieving and now destitute mother. And then when the two of them went down to Mutual Savings to have a talk with the people there and try to straighten things out, all they heard was, Sorry, there was nothing to be done. The land was gone, already sold. That land which they had thought they were fighting to defend back in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

As the situation began to sink in on them, they soon reacted in the only way that men of their sort know how to react. Hard men who know their way around guns. They reacted by holding up the local branch of Mutual Savings, though with one strange feature of their robbery being the fact that they showed more interest in damaging the bank itself than they did in taking

its money. Destroying everything that they could get their hands on, and in that way striking back at the institution which had done them so much harm.

It wasn't long before the police came after them, knowing full well who the guilty parties were. Though in doing so, those poor local officers could have had no idea what they were getting themselves into by going after a pair like that. A pair who had them so completely outmatched that by the time the smoke had cleared, it was the cops who were on the run while the brothers went strolling away as calmly as could be. Victorious at the end of their first robbery and shoot-out, as was to be the case with the next one and the one after that, so that soon the two of them were blazing a trail of destruction across that part of the state. Attacking one branch of Mutual Savings after another, not to mention the stores and gas stations which were owned by that same conglomerate. Each attack ending with the building left gutted and barely standing, if at all. And they made so much noise and did so much damage to the company that soon they began to evolve into some sort of Robin Hood figures for all those who had suffered at the company's hands.

Robin Hoods without the Merry Men, as the driver was quick to point out in that cynical tone of his. And while they may have stolen a great deal of money from that rich business conglomerate during the course of their actions, they were more likely to have burned what they got than they were to have given it to the poor.

I found the story fascinating and deserving of far wider circulation than it had ever received, though when I mentioned that fact to the teller of the tale, his response was less than enthusiastic. He said that it was best to let sleeping dogs lie, or something to that effect. And after that he clammed up completely, so that there was nothing more said among us until the driver had pulled over to drop me off. Brought the car to a halt at the foot of an off-ramp in some town or other just as the sun was about to set. With both of them smiling and telling me, "Good luck," as I got out of the car.

I soon made my way up the on-ramp in search of a favorable hitchhiking spot, and as I went, I noticed that by coincidence there was a Mutual Gas—as I'll call it—on the other side of the freeway. While also by coincidence, I noticed that my two recent companions were on their way over to that very station to fill their tank with gas. Or so I assumed the case to be. Until suddenly, not more than a minute later, all hell broke loose over there. An alarm bell started screaming its warning, punctuated by loud pops and bangs. Gunshots and small explosions. And then as I saw heavy black smoke starting to pour from the place, all at once the two men came tearing out of there with tires squealing.

The Jeffries brothers themselves! I knew it in an instant as I heard more shots ring out, some guy from the gas station shooting wildly in their direction. So wildly that I hit the ground as the brothers came barreling toward me. But then just as I poked my head up to watch them race past, they stopped for some reason by the foot of the on-ramp. They pulled over and the driver rolled down his window even as a bullet or two whizzed past, calling out to me in as calm and casual a voice as could be, "Sorry we can't give ya a ride."

"Hey, good luck, you guys," I shouted back. "Go for it, man. Go for it!"

With a quick smile, a peace sign from the passenger, their car was soon roaring back into action, taking off in the direction of a smaller road nearby. A road that headed west. I rose to my feet once again as the gunfire ceased, and then I stood watching them as they rode away. Rode off into the sunset in the way that any good western hero is supposed to do.

Revolution, brothers! I waved my fist at them as they disappeared from sight. I hope you make it. I hope they never catch you.

ON TO POTATO COUNTRY

Satch and Gary arrived at the next railway junction down the line a few days later, after a day spent hiding out and a couple more lounging around the jungle. That quiet, peaceful, wino-free jungle thanks to Gary's efforts. They arrived at the junction which Satch knew was going to be their last stop together, the two of them going their separate ways from that point on. With Gary catching a train on the northern branch of the line, the main route leading over the mountains and on to the coast, while Satch would be taking one on the slower and less-travelled southern branch. Riding along until he came to a town where he could make connections with another company whose trains would take him south into potato country.

Or in truth they were going to take him even further south than that since Satch had no intention of actually picking potatoes once he got there, having used that story as a simple ruse, an excuse to tag along with the big guy this far. And so now that the two of them were about to split up, there would be no reason for him to stop off once he reached potato country. No reason not to continue on to the south. Or then again, did he have to continue on to the west at all once Gary was gone? Couldn't he just reverse his tracks right there where he was and head back toward the east? Back through the same towns and railyards he had just been through, country music playing on the radio and the jungles filled with winos. Hostile winos. While he would be making the trip all alone this time, without Gary there to back him up and... Oh, what the hell! Potato country would be okay as long as he didn't stay there, and then once he was past it, he could always catch a train heading east on a different route. Or perhaps he might decide to continue on to the south or to turn west or any other direction that he damn well pleased, what with him being back to his old status as loner and leader by that time. A man who could go anywhere he chose.

As for Gary, he seemed to be in no great hurry to catch a westbound train and continue on his way, acting as though he preferred to spend a few days in that town where they were instead. He made no effort to ask about departing trains, and then that evening as the two of them sat eating a meal of Spaghetti-O's, along with some of that rabbit food of his, he announced his intention to head out that night and do the place up right. To celebrate the end of their journey and their time together with a big-time blow-out, according to what he said. And when Satch responded to the guy's proposal with a look of deep-seated doubt on his face, the look of a man who knows all too well how fast money can disappear when a person goes out drinking in bars, Gary added a quick, "And the drinks're on me, okay? All of em."

So how could Satch pass up an offer like that? Made in that man-to-man sort of way. He couldn't, of course. And he was practically burning with anticipation as he finished his meal and got ready for his first night-on-the-town in ages. Years or at least months. The first drink which he would be able to sip while seated comfortably at a bar, an honored patron in a high-class establishment. And his head was filled with visions of beauty as he made his preparations, put away his eating utensils and stomped out the remains of the fire and then looked around for a good wino-proof hiding place in which to leave their bags while they were gone. A pair of gentlemen out for an evening of pleasure.

Soon on their way toward that town which kept looking better and better all the time as they made their approach in the fading light. A pretty little place in a cowboy sort of way, a western way though real-life western, not the Hollywood version. Old and well preserved and oozing such cow-country character that Satch never would have dared to enter it alone, not with all the negative stereotypes about cowboys that he carried around in his head. Though knowing that now he had a white guy by his side as he went, and a big, strong white guy at that, he felt like he was ready to take on anything that night. Ready to deal with whatever came his way.

They stopped outside the first bar they came to on their way in from the tracks, a little place that seemed to have cowboy written all over it, though working cowboy, not the phony type. A good old workingman's bar in its western incarnation. So real and so down-home that no sooner had Satch seen the place than he liked it. The look of it almost as much as the whole idea behind it: a building dedicated exclusively to drinking. To pouring alcohol into glasses and then pouring it down the customers' throats.

Oh, this is going to be a beautiful night, Satch said to himself as he surveyed the place, the rustic-looking sign and the faded brick façade and the cowboy-style covered sidewalk. And he wasn't a bit disappointed when he walked through the door and entered that world, either. Dark and cool and with a faint odor of alcohol filling the air. So that while the interior of the place may have been nothing special, just a simple, straightforward, no-nonsense bar, still it was a case of love at first sight. Love for the bar and even love for its patrons to some extent, those eight or ten western-looking types who were hanging around in there as the two of them entered, some of them in cowboy hats and some not, and all of them as white as could be. Though even with as white as they were, still there wasn't one of them that gave Satch a dirty look when he walked in. Not one. And in fact, the guy down the bar from where he took a seat even nodded a greeting as he sat down.

"Ya wanna beer?" Gary asked as the two of them settled into their places at the bar.

A beer? So much liquid for so little alcohol. "Uh..."

"Er how bout somethin' stronger?"

"Yeah, sure." Of course he wanted something stronger. Of course he did! And the stronger the better.

It didn't take long for Gary to begin making friends as they sat at the bar, talking and joking with the guy next to him and the guy over there and the one over there. Laughing away like Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky. Mr. Personality. And with the way he was acting, so animated and so

outgoing, the other guys quickly responded in kind. Brad and Tim and that other guy whose name Satch failed to catch. As meanwhile each time that Gary made his own introductions, he was careful to say, "Satch as in Satchmo," so that there were none of those stupid-ass Bowery Boys comments about the name.

Right away Satch liked the guys he was meeting that night. A good bunch, he thought. Good for white guys, anyway. And then as time went on and he got a few drinks under his belt, they seemed to get nothing but better, those guys with whom he was sharing all the luxuries which he had nearly forgotten about over recent months. Luxuries such as barstools and drinks, real drinks served in glasses, with ice and everything else. So that even if the music being played on the jukebox may have been country, what did that matter? It was still beautiful. And the women he was seeing in there? The one who was already there when the two of them walked in and the couple of others who entered shortly afterwards? They looked truly fantastic to him, the first women he had seen up close in such a long time. And not only up close, but in a setting like that. One that was custom-made for a guy to score. If he knows how to talk to the ladies, that is.

Gary didn't show much interest in getting to know the women, though. He seemed much more interested in laughing and joking with the guys. With the one in the cowboy hat, Brad or Tim, whichever he was, and the guy without the hat and the bald guy as well. He told them a few of his sea-stories as they sat at the bar, funny ones which the group of them lapped right up. Because those stories must have sounded awfully exotic to them, land-locked as they were out there on the western edge of the Great Plains. And not only did Gary tell them stories about a lot of faraway places, but he was also willing to stop and listen whenever one of them had a story of his own to tell, laughing and making the appropriate comments at the end. While as for Satch, there were several times that the guy tried to bring him into that conversation in which he otherwise had no real part, saying things about music and then bragging about it to all those present. Telling them, "Oh man, I tell ya. This guy's the best harmonica player in the world. The best! Number one. Cause man, ya just gotta hear him play."

Satch didn't know where all that sudden enthusiasm for his music could have been coming from that night. Not when to all appearances the guy's interest in it had faded away so completely some time back. Ever since he had cut down on his drinking. Because he hadn't requested a song in what seemed like ages, and Satch hadn't volunteered to play one for him, either. Not since back before his injury, neither of them even bothering to bring the subject up on the day that crazy kid came by to visit. But now tonight, as Gary sat there sucking down shots-and-beers one after another, his enthusiasm for the music seemed to have been revived all at once, almost as if by magic.

And his enthusiasm was so contagious, the repetitions of his sales pitch so frequent, that before long some of those present began to pester Satch to get up and give them a sample of his playing. Brad-or-Tim and the other guy especially, the one without the hat. They urged him to get out his harmonica and play them a tune, and they seemed disinclined to take no for an answer when he told them that he couldn't do it right then. Told them that there was this thing wrong and that thing wrong. And since Gary kept bringing the subject back up at intervals, whenever the others seemed ready to let the whole thing drop, Satch didn't know what he would have to do. Because he couldn't get up and play in front of an audience, could he? A whole room-full of people. But at the same time, it kept getting harder to put the group of them off. And then when

it finally reached the point where he had run out of every other conceivable excuse, he turned to Gary and looked him straight in the face and laid the whole thing on the line. More or less. "I can't do it cause I ain't drunk enough."

To which Brad-or-Tim responded with a loud and commanding, "Get this man a double. Or no, make it a triple."

So what could Satch do now? Could he try asking for another drink and another and another? No, not after one of the guys went over to stop people from putting any more money into the jukebox, so that before long the canned-music came to an end. And he especially couldn't dodge it after Gary got up beside the silent jukebox and announced to one and all, "This here's Satch—as in Satchmo—and he's the best harmonica player in the whole damned world. Best ya ever heard."

The best in the world? How could Satch live up to a billing like that? With nothing but that battered old harmonica of his. And all those eyes staring at him expectantly, all those ears ready to hear him play. How could he help but make a fool of himself?

"C'mon, man. Go for it!" Gary egged him on. "Remember how ya do it, right? Ya just gotta do it, that's all."

Just do it? What other choice do I have? he asked himself as he moved hesitantly toward the "stage," the sudden silence in the room seeming to press in upon him as all the residual aches and pains of the beating he had taken a few days back began to reassert themselves. Tum-ta-ta-tum-ta-ta-tum-ta-tum. Satch began quietly and nervously, the silence flowing back in around him between each note, while the only other sound to be heard was that of Gary clapping along. Soon the big guy was stomping his foot as well, doing everything he could to spur his friend on. To help him get his head into the music in the way that he should, while perhaps at the same time trying to prove himself right. Prove that this guy really was the best.

It was hard for Satch to get into it, though. He had never done anything like that before, never felt so alone in his life as he did standing before that crowd, and so while the rhythms he was playing may have been the same as always, his own lack of self-confidence seemed to drag the whole thing down. And it wasn't until after he came to a halt at the end of his first song, if you can call it a song, that things finally took a turn for the better. Because no sooner had he stopped playing than there was a burst of applause. Most of it coming from Gary, though several of the others joined in as well. Brad-or-Tim and a few more.

So they liked it, huh? Satch said to himself as he listened to that response. Well they ain't heard nothin' yet. And then as he started in on a second number, soon it was the real thing that was coming out of that mouth-organ of his. The real thing that he had played back in that small-town jungle on the first day he met Gary. The music that he felt, that he lived. Music that came straight from everything that he was and everything he would ever be. Straight from his heart, his mind, his soul.

And the audience? They seemed to love it. They clapped along, or at least some of them did. Gary and the four or five others who were with him. They clapped with the rhythm, and they applauded when he paused between songs, and they yelled encouragement to him from time to

time. Gary and one or two of the others did, anyway. And with that small group around Gary being so demonstrative in their support, it was hardly noticeable that the rest of those present were saying and doing nothing. Resuming their conversations among themselves, most of them, or pretending to ignore him in other ways. So that it wasn't until one of them decided to come right out and air his opinion openly that there was ever a visible sign of dissent in that room. A grizzled-looking older guy who had evidently heard enough as he came walking up and dropped a coin into the jukebox by which Satch stood and then punched in a song.

Satch stopped what he was doing and stood indecisive as country music began to wail from the big box at his side. Until all at once Gary yelled, "Hey man, play along!" Being so quickly backed up by his small cadre of loyalists that Satch soon did as he had been told. He put the harmonica back up to his mouth and began to blow-and-suck once again. Began to add a whole new rhythm part to that country song which its original composer could never have imagined, might not have believed possible even had he heard it that night.

And it was a good part that he was adding to that song. It was a great part. Satch could sense the beauty, the majesty of what he was doing at that moment. The way he was adding something brand new to the song, something completely original, while at the same time the song was adding whole new dimensions to his own playing. Dimensions which had never been there before. Things like melody and harmony. So that while the outward reaction of the audience may have remained unchanged from what it had been before, with Gary and a few others making all the noise, still he could feel the ever stronger grip which he was gaining over them. Over all of them. He could feel his growing power, even over those who had their backs turned. Even over those who tried to act like he wasn't there.

So this is what it feels like to be a star, huh? he asked himself as he surveyed his public. Because he knew that he had them right where he wanted them as he played. He knew that they were his, completely his. All the guys admiring him and envying him, while the women... Well, it was pretty obvious that the ones who had dates were going to be fantasizing about him that night when they made love to their husbands or boyfriends. That went with the territory of being a star, as Satch well knew. While as far as the single women were concerned—or rather the single woman, that one sitting over there—it was just a matter of time before she threw herself at him. A groupie whether she wanted to be or not.

Satch played on and on until his mouth had grown so dry that he needed a break, along with another drink or two. And his wish for alcohol was quickly granted when he returned to his old spot at the bar to find that drinks were starting to come his way. Three, four of them, bought by his various admirers. And that's not to mention the whole pack of cigarettes that he got, real cigarettes, tailor-mades, when he tried to bum a smoke from the bald guy. And then when Gary came over to join him a short time later, showing off the several dollars which he had gathered by passing the hat—including a few coins which he had insisted upon receiving from the old guy who fed the jukebox, he said pointedly—Satch's sense of triumph was complete, his sense of mastery absolute.

And his only moment of deception came when he tried to approach that one available single lady. Giving her his best ten-years-ago rap, "Hey pretty mama, how's it goin'?" only to

have her turn and walk away without a word. Playing hard to get, Satch told himself, so that he would have to bide his time and wait for her to come around.

He got up and played another set a short time later, and with all the rounds of drinks that were sent his way as a result, he was truly in alcoholic heaven by the time he left the bar that night. He was practically floating as he and his big friend made their way back to the jungle to get some sleep. Off to sleep alone, each of them, since when it came to playing hard to get, that lady back at the bar had been an expert, a real expert. Walking away from him each time he tried to make an approach and finally leaving with some other guy. Some cowboy.

But even though he wouldn't be getting laid that night, still Satch was feeling the best that he had in a long, long time. Maybe the best ever considering the scale of the artistic triumph which he had just enjoyed. And his head was far-and-gone lost in the clouds as he walked along the silent street and then down the deserted railroad tracks. It was doing drunken loop-the-loops somewhere high above, flitting from one image to another of his future rise to fame and fortune. Big houses and swimming pools and women everywhere. Black women and white women and brown women. All types and as many as he could handle.

As for Gary, he was clearly in an ecstatic mood as well, strolling along with a jaunty step and whistling one of the country tunes which he had recently heard, though doing so with some of Satch's beat thrown in. And the smile that covered his face was so big and so obvious that Satch knew it was there even without looking. The big guy all pumped up though saying nothing about how he felt, not until they were somewhere around halfway to their destination, that is. Right in the middle of the railyard where suddenly Gary broke the silence of the night. "Yeah man, this is it. This is what it's all about."

"Huh...?" Satch wasn't sure that he wanted the silence to be broken just yet, the visions of groupies floating around in his head to be disturbed.

"Freedom I mean. This is what freedom's all about, man."

Freedom? How could anyone be thinking about something as stupid as that on a night like this? A night which was custom-made for visions of champagne and caviar—and of course groupies.

"Yeah, it's true, man. Cause freedom *is*. I'm sure-a that now. Freedom *is*!" Gary paused for a moment. Though when Satch failed to respond, doing his best to return to his own thoughts and hoping that the guy would take the hint and shut up, Gary soon went on. "I mean, freedom is like... It's not somethin' ya can defend or anything like that. It's not somethin' ya can fight for, and it's not somethin' ya can lose either, cause it's like... It's inside ya, man! It's the way ya live, the whole way ya live. It's... It's *you*, man. It's who ya are. It's *what* ya are. It's like... I mean, ya can be free if ya just wanta be, man. Ya can be freedom!"

Satch still had nothing to say. Not when the ideas that the guy was blathering about were so far removed from where he wanted his own thoughts to be that night.

"And it has nothin' to do with wavin' flags, man. I tell ya that. It has nothin' to do with wavin' em and nothin' to do with burnin' em either, cause flags got nothin' to do with freedom,

man. Absolutely nothin'! They're just... They're bullshit, man. Cause it's what ya do with your life that really counts. It's how ya live every day and what ya got in your head. And ya don't have to run around tryin' to prove that you're free. Not if ya already are. Ya don't have to get some stupid-ass haircut, and ya don't have to go around actin' like some asshole. Not if you're free for real, man. All the way down inside. Cause if ya are, then ya don't need any-a that bullshit. None of it! Ya can just...

"I mean, the counter-culture? What the fuck do we got for a counter-culture now-days, anyway? We got nothin' man, that's what we got. We got posture, we got pretend, and none of it's got any heart or any guts or any... Cause like, just look around ya, man. Look at this bullshit. Do you see a counter-culture out there anywhere? And I mean a real counter-culture, man. The real thing. Well not me. I don't see shit! Cause the only counter-culture I see around here anymore is you, man. It's you!"

"Me...?" With the sudden reference to himself, Satch found that his attention was being drawn to his friend's words whether he wanted it to be or not.

"Yeah man, it's you. Cause you're like... I mean, you're about as counter to this culture as a person can get. You're like all the way over there, man. And I mean all the way. As far as ya can go. Cause you're like... You're freedom, man. You're freedom!"

Freedom? Me!? Jesus Christ. What the fuck did they put in this guy's drinks?

"Cause I saw it, man. I swear I did, back when I was ridin' along on that bus. Back when I was lookin' out the window, and I saw this train out there and some guy ridin' on it, and I just... I mean, there was that guy just sayin' fuck it all, ya know. Fuck the whole fuckin' thing. Same as what you're sayin', man. Cause like he wasn't havin' a goddamned thing to do with any-a this bullshit that we call a world and a country and a society. None of it. Not the system and not the values and not the whole way-a life. Cause he was like... I mean, if there's any such thing as droppin' out like what the hippies used to talk about, well man this is it. This is droppin' all the way out. As far as ya can go. Cause like this is the alternative, ya know. This is the only alternative we've still got left. It's the only counter-culture there is anymore. So it's like... I mean, either it's this or else it's sellin' out, ya know. It's surrender!"

Surrender? Selling out? Those middle-class-white-boy concepts meant nothing to Satch, and he couldn't understand why it was that so many of those hippie-druggie-burnout types took them so seriously. Why they acted as though they were some sort of life-and-death questions when in reality they were nothing but empty words. Selling out? To whom was anyone selling out and for what? He had no idea what the guy could be talking about. And so he was glad when Gary finally stopped blabbing and let him get back to his own thoughts. His own enchanted little world. Money and cars and groupies. Oh man, it was going to be so great when he finally hit it big. So great!

But then no sooner had they arrived back at the jungle than his thoughts were suddenly interrupted once again. Interrupted by the sight that met his eyes in the moonlit night and made him freeze in his tracks. The sight of someone sleeping on the ground in that jungle of theirs.

Two someones sleeping there. Two winos! Sleeping right there like they owned the place or something. In that jungle which belonged to him! To him!!

“What the fuck!” Satch blurted out as he went over and kicked at the feet of one of the sleeping winos. And then, “What the fuck!” he repeated more loudly.

The winos were quickly out of their bedding and onto their feet, two dried-up little guys who looked exactly like every other wino that Satch had ever seen. Like all those guys must be brothers or something. And then as the two of them retreated toward the far side of the clearing, they looked back warily, ready to run or ready to defend themselves if need be. Watching every move that the two bigger men made.

“What the fuck!” Satch repeated the only phrase that would come to his pickled brain as he stood watching as well. Not wanting to make the first move even though he knew that the guys deserved a good ass-kicking. Those guys who looked exactly like the ones who beat him up back in that other town. Exactly.

Still he did nothing, though. Standing and staring just as his opponents did, so that the fast-developing stalemate might have gone on for hours that night had it not been for his friend. Gary who didn’t just break the stalemate when he suddenly leaped into action, but rather he destroyed it. Smashed it to bits as he went after those guys with an anger and a violence that Satch had never seen in him before. Yelling, “Hey look! That asshole’s wearin’ my coat!” as he charged straight at the offender. Striking so fast that he had the guy in his grip before he could make a move to get away, the one in the oversized coat who wriggled and struggled and tried to break free while the other wino scrambled to gather up his gear and get out of there. And then as Gary stood holding his victim with one hand, he raised the other hand and gave the guy a slap. Whack!! Hit him so hard that the guy’s ears would surely be ringing for weeks. So hard that even Satch winced at the sound.

Whack! He hit the guy a second time before grabbing the coat and tearing it off his back as the little wino stood wobbly on his feet, his knees nearly buckling beneath him. “You fuckin’ thief. You motherfuckin’ thief. Ya wanted this, huh?”

“I didn’t do...” Whack! The wino never got a chance to finish his sentence.

“Hey, take it easy, man.” Satch was sobering up quickly at the sight. “Don’t kill him.”

“I’ll kill any motherfuckin’ thief I wanta kill!” Gary’s voice sounded deadly serious.

“But I didn’t...” Whack!

“And you shut the fuck up!”

The wino could barely walk by the time Gary had finished with him at last. Staggering off into the darkness with nothing at all, no coat and no sleeping-bag and not even any shoes. Only his life and the few clothes that he had on his back.

“That motherfucker! I can’t believe that asshole. Stealin’ my shit. That cocksuckin’ motherfucker.” Gary went on and on with his cursing as the injured man practically crawled away. “Man, what a piece-a shit. What a motherfuckin’ piece-a shit.” And it wasn’t until he began to put on his recently recovered coat that ever his diatribe came to an end. A sudden and very abrupt end.

“Hey man, this isn’t my coat,” he said quietly in an incredulous voice before falling silent all at once. And after that, not another word came from his mouth for the rest of the night. Not a word as the two of them went off to the hiding place and recovered their bags intact, and not a word as he stretched out on the ground where one of the winos had been and tried to get some sleep. Tried but clearly failed.

Because the big guy kept tossing and turning all night long, making it hard for Satch to get any sleep himself, and this despite all the alcoholic assistance which he had received. But it was like there was something weighing on Gary’s mind. Like it bothered him to know that he had just beaten some wino to within an inch of his life for something that he hadn’t done. For a case of mistaken identity, or rather a case of mistaken clothing. As though it mattered to him that the guy hadn’t been guilty of that particular crime when you knew damned well that he was guilty of having done hundreds of worse things in the past. Things that by any rights should have earned him a beating long before that. A hundred beatings. So that as Satch saw it, the one which he had just received had been fully deserved, if only as a matter of principle.

But evidently Gary didn’t see things that way, as became all too clear from his behavior the next morning. His silence and his moping around all morning long, his apathy even when he was offered a drink of coffee. His inability so much as to raise his hand to receive it.

Oh, it was a sorry case that Satch had to deal with that day, and he didn’t know what he could say or do to perk the guy back up. To get him back to being the same old Gary that he had been before, talking and joking and being his friend. Because the guy was so silent and pensive that day that nothing seemed to get through to him, and nothing that Satch said could elicit the most minimal response. Not a word or a look or a movement of the head. Just silence, the big guy sitting there like he was made of stone.

And it wasn’t until the morning was nearly over that a word finally came from his mouth. “I wonder where he went,” he muttered in a voice so low that Satch could barely hear it. And then no sooner had Gary spoken than he was on his feet taking action, gathering up the wino’s belongings, the shoes and the sleeping-bag and the coat, and carrying them over to the edge of the jungle by where the guy had left the night before. Setting everything down by the side of the trail and slipping a few bills into the pocket of the coat as he did so, it appeared to Satch.

“Ya know, ya might be wantin’ that sleepin’-bag up there where you’re goin’,” Satch said as his friend returned to the heart of the jungle, though it was only for his words to be met with more silence. “Cause I imagine it gets pretty cold at night goin’ through them mountains, ya know. Even this time-a year.”

“Nah,” Gary acknowledged his presence at last.

“I mean, that guy’s prob’ly not comin’ back, ya know. He’s prob’ly miles away from here by now, and it seems like a waste to just...”

“Nah, I don’t need it,” Gary cut him off before he could finish.

Though when the guy said nothing more after that, nothing over the next minute or so, Satch finally decided to give it one more try. “Ya know, it gets cold enough where I’m goin’, but up there in them higher mountains where you’re goin’...”

“I ain’t goin’ there,” Gary cut him off again.

“Ya ain’t goin’ there...?” Satch didn’t know what to make of that statement, and in his surprise, the next question came out almost by itself. “So where’re ya goin’?”

“I’m goin’ to work, man. I’m gonna go get me a job... Pickin’ potatoes.”

“Ya what...?” Picking potatoes!? Did he actually say picking potatoes just now? That he was actually planning on...

“Yeah man, cause I gotta make a change in my life, ya know. I gotta like... I can’t just keep on goin’ like this.”

“But pickin’ potatoes?”

“Anything, man! Cause I gotta do somethin’ different. I gotta make a change. I just got to!” Gary spoke with deep solemnity, as though he were announcing some great, life-altering decision.

And as Satch listened to those words, he suddenly became aware of the changes which they portended for him as well. Of the fact that with Gary now planning to accompany him all the way to potato country, he would soon find himself with his back against the wall. Forced to go through with that asinine plan which he had thrown out so carelessly a couple of weeks before. Unless he could come up with some good excuse for not doing so, that is, some way to avoid carrying it out. And one that didn’t involve admitting that he had been lying about it all along, hopefully. “But why d’ya wanta do that? I thought ya was a seaman.”

“Not anymore, I’m not. Or at least not for awhile, cause I gotta like... I mean, shippin’ out and droppin’ out and all that...”

“But potatoes, man? Pickin’ potatoes? That’s hard work, ya know.”

“It don’t matter, cause I can do it. I can handle it.”

Gary sounded so serious and so determined in what he had to say that Satch knew he would have to try a different tack if he wanted to get through to the guy and change his mind. He would have to try some other approach. “But what about freedom, man? What about freedom *is*?”

“Fuck freedom!”

“Fuck freedom...?”

“Yeah man, fuck freedom. Cause freedom’s a joke, ya know. It don’t mean a thing. Not one fuckin’ thing!” Gary’s emotions were running so high that the words seemed to flow straight from his heart. His broken and defeated heart. “Freedom’s an illusion, man. It’s nothin’ but an illusion. Cause all that stuff last night? That was nothin’ but drunk-talk, man. It was nothin’ but a bunch-a bullshit from some asshole who had way too much to drink and started shootin’ off his mouth about all this shit that he knows nothin’ about. Nothin’!”

“But pickin’ potatoes, man?” Satch wasn’t ready to concede the fight just yet, even with as high as the guy’s emotions were running.

“Yeah, anything man. Anything at all! Cause I gotta get on with my life is what. I can’t just keep on... I mean, it’s time for me to grow up, ya know. It’s time for me to get a job, and I mean a real job, not just shippin’ out. Not when shippin’ ain’t worth a shit anymore anyway, not with the way all them containerships are comin’ in and takin’ over, all the good ships goin’ away...”

A real job? Like picking potatoes!? What could Satch say to combat such a twisted logic as that?

Nothing, it seemed, as Gary soon went on with his thoughts. “Cause like all that droppin’ out and that rebellin’ against the system and the counter-culture and that... Man, it was all a bunch-a bullshit! The whole fuckin’ shittaree. It was nothin’ but a giant waste-a time, and it never changed a fuckin’ thing. Nothin’!! Not one thing! Cause I mean, look around ya man, and tell me what ya see. D’ya see any revolution goin’ on out there? D’ya see any change? No, ya don’t see shit. And ya know why ya don’t? It’s cause the assholes won!! That’s what happened, man. The assholes won and it’s their world now. They’re the ones who’re runnin’ things now, and they’re the ones... Cause like what is it that it says in the Bible? Somethin’ about, The assholes shall inherit the earth. Right? Somethin’ like that? Well ya know what, that book sure as shit got it right, cause that’s exactly what they did in this country. The assholes won, and now they own the whole fuckin’ thing. They own the whole fuckin’ world. And us? We got nothin’, man. We don’t even have our pride anymore. And all we can do is crawl around on our bellies and try to get by in this world that they control. This asshole fuckin’ world.”

But picking potatoes? Satch wished that he could find some way to get through to the guy and show him what a huge mistake he was making with that decision of his. Though given how stubbornly convinced Gary sounded in what he had to say, it seemed pretty obvious that his sweet potatoes were already in the ground by then and there was no going back. Or to be more correct with the analogy, it was obvious that the guy had changed his mind all at once and torn out the sweet potatoes and planted corn, so that now that was what he was going to be growing. That was his final decision.

And not only was Gary’s mind made up, but he also seemed to be in a big hurry to get going all at once, talking about catching the very next train leaving on the southern route. Saying that it didn’t matter to him if that meant riding all night long. No sleep, no rest, just riding and

riding. And he wouldn't hear a word of it when Satch tried to bring up the possibility of the two of them returning to that cowboy bar for another evening of music and booze. Because he dismissed the whole idea out of hand, doing so with such fire in his voice as to make it clear to Satch that if he were to go there by himself, he would never see his big friend again.

And if the guy was going to be that way about it, then what could Satch do but go along with him and wait until he got over whatever it was that was bothering him? Catch a train leaving that night without so much as a goodbye drink to the scene of his great musical triumph. That town and that little bar which would always hold such a warm spot in his heart. But instead the only toast he was able to give to the place came as he sat in the jungle waiting for their train to leave, hoisting up a bottle of cheap wine which he had bought with part of his earnings from the previous night and drinking it alone since his friend refused to join him. Refused to take a single sip. Not on that day and not later. Not once during the rest of the time that they were together. Gary evidently having fallen into a depression of some sort, though it was a strange depression from which he suffered, it seemed to Satch. One in which he stopped drinking rather than starting up in the way that most people do when they're depressed.

So the two of them caught a train heading west that evening. They caught it as the old wino's belongings still sat in the spot where Gary had left them. Untouched. And since the trains on that branch of the line consisted mainly of ore-cars and the like, they couldn't find a single empty boxcar in which to ride. Nothing but a flat-car on which they took their seats and got ready for a long, miserable night. Wind and perhaps even rain as they sat exposed to the elements, with nothing for protection. Nothing but Satch's blankets which he soon wrapped around himself, while as for his big friend, the guy sat stoically with his back to the wind, saying nothing. Not even trying to sleep, apparently, but instead he sat there in a meditative pose like some Buddha. Some dark and depressed and brooding Buddha.

It wasn't until late the next afternoon that they finally made it to their destination, wind-blown and bedraggled and in great need of rest after such a long, slow slog. Or at least Satch needed a rest while Gary seemed impervious to exhaustion. Because he was all business as they got off the train and started to walk in the direction of the other company's yard, the one that would take them to potato country. And then once they arrived at that new yard, the only thing that he wanted to do was to ask about the trains heading south. About the very next train, leaving at whatever hour it happened to leave.

Satch wanted to do something to slow the guy down, but he didn't know how to go about it. When he tried to bring up the subject of looking for a jungle where the two of them could lay down and get some sleep, Gary's only response was a blank look. And when he tried to suggest that they go out looking for a bar where they could... you know, go in and play music and pass the hat and... All at once he was met with an explosive, "No!" A refusal so emphatic that he knew the entire subject was dead from there on out.

As dead as his whole musical career appeared to be. Because while Satch may have been tempted to go out looking for a bar on his own, he knew deep in his guts that it would never work out. Knew that he would fall flat on his face if he ever tried playing and passing the hat in one of those places on his own. Without his friend there to back him up. To stir up the crowd and lead them on in the way that he had done the other night, cheering and howling and staring down

any opposition, so that the only thing left for Satch to do had been to play his music. Everything else taken care of by his friend. His manager.

And if the guy refused to play his part any longer, then what could he do? Satch didn't like the idea of being a one-hit-wonder, or rather a one-night-stand-wonder, but he could see no other choice right then. No way to revive his career without the big guy's help, and no way to bring the guy around. Nothing to do but to follow along and hope for the best and wait for his friend to get over that depression of his at last.

Or in other words, Satch had to catch another late night train, spend another miserable night getting bounced around, though at least on this occasion the two of them managed to find a boxcar in which to ride so that they didn't have to sit out in the wind. And since the new railroad line taking them out of town turned out to be much faster than the one they had ridden in on, they made very good time as they headed south that night and the next morning. Shooting past sidings and rolling through towns with hardly a reduction in speed. Making their way steadily toward the big junction that lay ahead.

That junction whose name came to Satch with a sudden start when he opened his eyes in the morning to find daylight. That junction whose name was so infamous among hoboes, as he remembered all at once, having been warned about it some time back by an old-timer who had told him that the place had the worst bulls in the whole country. They catch you in that yard of theirs and it's thirty days in the can, no questions asked, the guy had said. And now here they were, the two of them, about to go stumbling into that very yard. Stumbling into thirty days in jail!

Satch was soon at the door looking for names and signs, asking Gary to do the same. And then whenever one of them saw anything, he would consult the beat up old roadmap which he had found in a trash-can a few days back, trying to see how much longer they had before their moment of truth arrived. Watching and waiting until finally the signs became unmistakable, the tracks starting to divide and spread out, and the train slowing down, slowing down, so that clearly they were pulling into the yard. That infamous yard.

"Time to go for it," Satch yelled as he grabbed his bedroll and jumped out, followed shortly by Gary. And no sooner were the two of them on solid ground than they scooted away from the tracks and began to walk down a small road in the direction of town. Plodding along in silence as the houses and buildings gradually grew thicker and more abundant.

Plodding along and plodding along, until just as the center of town was coming into view, Gary spoke up all at once, "Hey man, isn't this where they grow the potatoes? Right around here?"

"Here?" Satch didn't like the sound of that word.

"Yeah man, this has gotta be it, I'm sure it is. So we don't gotta take any more trains outa here, do we? All we gotta do is look around here and get us some work. Right?"

Get work!? The words coming to Satch's ears were growing more unpleasant all the time, and he didn't know how to respond. What to do but grunt.

“So when’s the, uh...? Is it harvest time yet? Are they hirin’ now?”

Harvest time? Hiring? Shit! Why didn’t he think of that earlier? Back when it would have done him some good. Back when he could have used it as an excuse to slow things down, to stop off and take their time instead of rushing in there like a couple of idiots. “No, not yet,” Satch said with conviction even though he hadn’t a clue as to what the true answer might have been.

“So when is it, then? When does it start?”

“Later on, man. It starts, uh... later on.”

“But when?” Gary insisted. “When exactly?”

Satch didn’t know, of course. And if only the guy hadn’t gone on insisting and demanding an answer each time that he tried to dodge the question, perhaps he might not have blown his cover in the way that he finally did. Perhaps he might not have admitted to his friend at last that he had no idea. None whatsoever.

An admission to which Gary responded with more confusion in his voice than anything else. “So then what were ya plannin’ on doin’ once ya got here? Were ya just gonna hang around till it starts?”

“Yeah.” Something like that.

“So okay then, let’s go ahead, me and you. Let’s go out there and start askin’ around, okay?”

“I don’t know, man...” Because asking around? About picking potatoes!? No way, Satch said to himself. No way.

Though try as he might to change the subject over the next few minutes, it was only to find that Gary refused to be put off. Insisting that they go out looking for an agency where they could ask about work. Insisting that they do it then and there, and pushing the issue so hard that Satch soon found himself painted into a corner, completely trapped. Forced either to start carrying out the first steps of that damned-fool plan, that phony plan which he had made up on the spur of the moment weeks back, without a single thought of ever having to go through with it, or else to drop all pretense and tell the guy the truth at last. As distasteful as the idea of confession may have been. “Man, I ain’t gonna be pickin’ no potatoes.”

“Ya what?” Gary looked stunned when he heard those words. Like he couldn’t believe them at all.

So stunned that Satch immediately began to back off, began to leaven his sudden truthfulness with a bit more falsehood. “No man, I changed my mind is what. I went and... Well, I ain’t gonna be doin’ it after all.”

“No? Not after I came all the way here with ya?”

Jeez! He hadn't thought about that one, had he? And judging from the pain that came through in the guy's voice as he said those words, it was hard for Satch to know what to say next. Whether to continue on with that same story-line, saying that he was going to betray his friend after having led him all that distance, or whether to admit at last that he had been lying all along. That their entire journey together had been based upon a lie. A fabrication.

And he received no help as he looked at Gary, the big guy standing there in silence with an expression of pain on his face rather than anger. Showing none of the temper which he had unleashed upon that wino the other night, but instead his only visible emotion was one of disbelief. Of a failure to comprehend how it was possible for a man he had taken for a friend to have done something like this to him.

"I was never really gonna pick potatoes, man," Satch came out with the whole truth at last. "I was never..."

"So it was a lie? The whole thing was a lie?" There was still no anger in Gary's voice. Only disappointment. Disillusionment.

"No, it was just... It was more like a story, man. Like it was this story that I was tellin' ya..."

"Like a lie, huh?"

"No man, don't..." Satch didn't know how to finish. And when Gary turned away from him at that moment, he knew that it would do no good to say any more. Knew that his friend wasn't going to believe him no matter what he tried to say.

Knew as well that it would be a waste of time to try explaining his real plans in life, his plan to find and sell scrap metal and other items of value, or perhaps to try making money with his harmonica playing or through one of the other, even less practical pipe-dreams which he had floating around inside his head. And there was no use trying to talk about any of those concepts which the guy might have believed in just a few days before. About freedom and the counter-culture and that sort of thing, telling him that, "Hey man, I'm the counter-culture. Remember? And the counter-culture don't pick potatoes." He knew that any talk along those lines would have been completely useless, as determined as the guy obviously was to get a job. Any job.

So the two friends had little to say to one another as they wandered around town for the rest of that day, spent hours sitting in a park without a word between them. Not even when they got up to leave, the two of them walking off together out of sheer inertia, it appeared. Sheer habit. Hoofing it all the way past town toward the southern outskirts where they hoped to find a jungle. Or at least where Satch hoped to find one, while Gary's thoughts on the matter were unreadable. And it wasn't until after they had located a jungle and settled into it, after Satch had smoked the last of the tailor-made cigarettes which he still had left from that magical night and then saved the butt as he prepared his return to roll-your-owns, it wasn't until then that Satch dared to break the silence with one of the few lines he had spoken all afternoon. Asking Gary to watch his bedroll while he went off to town to score a bottle of wine.

Gary wanted none of the wine when Satch returned a short time later, his ever-deepening depression still turning him away from alcohol rather than toward it. And he hardly ate a bite when Satch started a fire and cooked up a can of corned-beef hash, eating none of the hash but instead munching away on nothing but his own rabbit food.

And the silence in that jungle wasn't broken again until sometime after dark when Gary stood up all at once and announced, "I'm goin' ... somewhere." To which Satch should have said, "Okay, goodbye, see ya later," though for some reason he didn't. Some reason having to do with inertia, most likely. Pure, drunken inertia as he got to his feet as well, grabbed his bedroll and tossed aside the now empty bottle before following along a bit unsteadily. Walking off toward the edge of the yard where they would have to catch a train the hard way: on the fly and without even knowing where it would take them since they had been too leery of that yard's reputation to have entered it and asked anyone. So that as they continued on their way, they would be heading off toward they knew not where. South or east or west. Anywhere but north, that was the only thing they knew for sure, that they wouldn't be going back the way they had come, as instead the train which they caught an hour or two later would be taking them in some other direction. Toward somewhere new.

The train made a stop at a little one-siding town early the next morning. And when Gary got up to look around and saw that there was a café sitting right there by the tracks, he turned to announce, "I'm gettin' out here. I'm gonna go get me a real breakfast this mornin'." Adding after a brief pause, "And I'll get one for you, too, if ya want it."

Satch hesitated for a moment, unsure how to respond to such an attractive offer as that. Unsure as to which inertia he should be following right then, whether he should stick with the train on which he was riding or stick with his friend instead. His soon-to-be-former-friend, as was becoming ever more clear with each passing moment. And if it hadn't been for the visions of bacon and eggs that quickly filled his head and set his mouth to watering, there is no telling which of the two he might have chosen in the end. Though it was thanks to those tempting visions that he was soon rolling up his blankets and jumping out to head for the café. The two of them entering the place with bags still in hand since they knew that it would hardly be worthwhile to put on a show in such a small town as that. A place where everyone would know exactly where they had come from, bags or no bags.

So Satch and his friend walked into that café together, though as fate would have it, they weren't to leave in the same way, walking back out separately instead. Each of them off to a different destination, a whole different life. Because while Satch would be returning to the railroad tracks once he had finished his meal, back to wait for the next passing train, Gary would be leaving for something quite different. For a job and a life and a future in the way that white guys always seem to do sooner or later. Leaving the road behind and becoming a part of the real world instead.

That world which held so little interest for Satch, as he knew from bitter experience, having been-there-done-that already. Knew that what he preferred instead was to continue on with the life which he had been living over the last few months. Going wherever he wanted whenever he wanted, his own man making his own life. And if the price of that life was going to be the loss of the companionship which he had enjoyed over the last couple of weeks, then so be

it. Because he was willing to pay that price, or more. And in fact, it might even come as a relief to go back to traveling alone in the way that he had done before, worrying about no one but himself. The loner once again, the leader-without-followers and the master of his own destiny. The complete master. Going anywhere that the trains might take him. Going nowhere while going everywhere. North and south and east and west, it was all the same to him. One direction was every bit as good as another.

PART VII

PLANNING

In which an appropriate course of action is chosen and the details laid out.

ENTER GABRIEL

Gabriel's name came from his mother's side of the family, having been used several times over recent generations, though for some reason he was never actually called by that name at home. Not even by his mother. Instead, he was called by his first two initials almost from the day he was born. And while he initially accepted that nickname unthinkingly as small children do, the question of liking or disliking it began to come up as he grew older. Those two simple letters. Such a plain and ordinary name for someone as exceptional as himself, it seemed at first. And it wasn't until after he had read and heard stories about certain other people who had gone by similar names—J.P. Morgan! H.L. Hunt!!—that his opinion ever started to change. Because the more he learned about those men and their careers, the more he came to admire them. And the more convinced he became that he should not only keep the name GB, but he should wear it with pride.

The perfect name for a boy who hoped to follow in those illustrious footsteps, it seemed to him. A boy who dreamed of wealth and power from an early age, dreamed of it even at a time when all the other boys wanted to be firemen or soldiers or cowboys. Because from as far back as he could remember, GB had always wanted to be a businessman when he grew up. A businessman like his father, though an even more successful one.

Or to tell the truth, it wasn't so much that he wanted to go into business when he grew up, but rather it was more a question of knowing that he would do so someday. As though it were his destiny, a future so inevitable that he could feel it somewhere deep inside, practically see it before his eyes. See the day when he was going to own everything that there was to own around there: the town and the people in it. Own it and run it as he saw fit. Giving his orders to all those pretty girls who ignored him, all those boys who teased him. Because he was going to be their boss and ruler someday. And oh, how he was going to make them pay!

How he was going to get even for all the humiliations he was forced to suffer through while growing up. The teasing, the scorn. Those humiliations which seemed so numerous and so devastating at the time, though to an objective observer they might have appeared little more than routine. What was to be expected for a kid who failed so miserably to live up to the manly ideals of the town in which he was raised. That town where they expected their men to be strong and tough, while poor GB was the complete opposite of that. He was soft and maybe even a bit effeminate in his manners. And since he was so easily intimidated, never daring to fight back, he was always an easy target.

He was a chubby kid who did poorly at sports, the last one picked whenever sides were being chosen. The kid that no one wanted on their team since he was sure to be the worst player no matter what the sport. Baseball, football, basketball, you name it. And he would always be the first to chicken out when there was any sort of danger involved in what the kids were doing, the last to take up a dare and the first to run away. And since he never made the least effort to stand his ground when attacked, either physically or verbally, he soon developed a reputation as a sissy and a cry-baby. A kid who was too scared to defend himself, responding instead with the meek and helpless look of a victim as he cringed in the most craven way. Cringed on the outside anyway, though on the inside things would be completely different. On the inside he would be silently plotting his revenge, jotting everything down in his memory while saying to himself, I'm gonna get even with this guy someday. I'm gonna make him pay. Because him? He's nothing. I'm gonna own him someday. I'm gonna buy him and sell him.

All those people who gave him a hard time, the kids and the adults as well, they were all going to feel his wrath someday. He was going to see to that. The active ones and the silent spectators as well. The ones who never said anything but just looked at him in the way that so many people did around there, with quiet disdain written all over their faces. Shaking their heads gently as though to say, "There goes that loser. There goes Al's loser of a little brother."

Because Al. The great and mighty Al. He was a real man if ever that town produced one, a guy who seemed to be the very embodiment of everything that the people around there valued. He was good-looking and athletic, the star of the football team along with every other sport he ever played. And he was always the leader of any group of kids in which he found himself, the one they all looked up to and listened to, the bravest and most resolute, the strongest, the fastest, and of course the most popular. The guy who all the girls were in love with and all the boys wanted to be just like.

And he always cast such a huge shadow over GB's life, his very existence a giant dark cloud that would never go away. So that while Al may not have been mean to his little brother, been very much the opposite, in fact, still GB came to hate him more than anyone or anything else in his life. He hated his big brother with a slow-burning passion, hated him not for what he did but for what he was. For being so darned good at everything he did. So darned superior! Because if only the guy had been normal or maybe even a bit of a loser, there would have been nothing about him to stir up any ill-feelings on the part of GB. Nothing to worm its way so relentlessly under his skin, to fuel his smoldering desire for revenge.

Revenge against that brother of his and against that town and that... Or wait a minute. What was GB thinking? How could he say something like that? Because he didn't hate that town and he never would, that mid-sized western town in which he was raised. A real-life western town at a time when cowboys were everyone's heroes. Ranch land surrounding it on all sides while just off to the east were mountains—not the Rockies but a lesser-known range—providing a beautiful and picturesque setting for a town of that size. That perfect size, it seemed to GB, since it was small enough to where you knew everyone living there, every face, while at the same time it was big enough to provide all the amenities of the American Way of Life during its most glorious years, the fifties and early sixties. It was big enough for county fairs and rodeos and parades; hamburger stands and ice-cream parlors and even a drive-in movie. Everything that a kid could have wanted back then.

Back in those years and that place which would come to seem so idyllic to GB as he grew older, and as they receded ever further into the past. Those golden years for a kid like him and for America as well. Those years of the endless upward spiral. Of harmony and growth and a prosperity such as no earlier generation had seen before—such as no future generation would ever see again. A fleeting moment, as it turned out to be, even if at the time it had seemed like it was going to go on forever: the country growing ever more powerful as the people in it grew richer by the day and year. The country and the town and the entire society booming along with no end in sight. And at the same time all the great questions of the day seemed so simple and straightforward back then, so easily answered that even a kid like GB could understand them. Because in those days, the good guys were good and the bad guys were bad and there was never any need for greys.

And then as if all that weren't good enough already, growing up in such a marvelous place at such a wonderful time, GB also happened to be the son of one of the town's leading citizens, the owner of the local feed store and one of the most prosperous and respected members of the business community. A man who counted for something in that town, and one whose opinions counted as well. Those opinions which were always so crystal-clear whenever he stated them, so utterly free of self-doubt. And so convincing to a boy like GB.

Because he learned so much by listening to that father of his. Learned that America is the greatest country the world has ever known, and that it should never be criticized. Ever! Unless of course you were criticizing the liberals and the socialists who took the place over back in the thirties and then started to ruin everything. Those New Dealers and the rest of them who deserved to be called whatever names you could think of. Those people who had to be stopped! Could have been stopped already if only Ike weren't so darned easy-going and so soft on communism. If only he were willing to stand up and fight for America in the way that a good conservative should. Push back hard and try to undo some of the damage which had been done by The Cripple and by that traitor Truman, that guy who not only gave away half the world to the commies, but then he turned around and fired the only general we had who was ready to do something about it. Because MacArthur was right, his father would say whenever the topic came up. We should have listened to MacArthur. We should have taken out the commies back when we had the chance. We should have done the same thing to the Chinks that we did to the Japs, not to mention what we should be doing to the Russkies right now.

Something tough, something decisive. Something final. The commies? Nuke em! The unions? Lock em up. Shoot em if you have to. And the civil rights movement? The first great national controversy which GB was old enough to remember in some detail. That communist conspiracy, as his father described it, with all those communist agitators going down to the South and stirring up the ni...

Or wait a minute. What's the correct word to use when referring to those people nowadays? Not the old one that his father would use. Not that racist word. Because GB wasn't a racist. Not him. Not like his father who... Or you know what? When you get right down to it, maybe his father wasn't such a racist either. Because that was just the way people talked back then, you know, people from his generation. They would use that word all the time, so that it really didn't mean anything. And come to think of it, there were a number of times when his

father would have good things to say about some of those people. Like about Nat King Cole, for instance, or Joe Louis, or maybe...

Anyway, what word should GB use now? One that wouldn't be offensive. Should he say the negroes? Or the blacks? Yeah, that's it. The blacks. That was who the communists were stirring up down there in the South. His father was sure that it was their handiwork since it had all the hallmarks, what with all the Jews that he had heard tell about, sneaking around and running things from the shadows. And that's not to mention the fact that the blacks just aren't smart enough to have thought up something like that on their own. Everyone knows that they aren't. So then who else could have been behind it but a bunch of commie agitators? And all those high-sounding words that they would throw out about civil rights and equality? That was nothing but a cover. It was a way to hide their real plan which was a communist takeover of America, a plan to weaken us so much that their friends in you-know-which countries would be able to move in and take over. Attack us and defeat us and destroy our whole way of life, take away our freedom and replace it with communism. Because that was the real goal of all those so-called civil rights people, even if they tried to keep it hidden.

But it was a goal that they couldn't hide from his father. Not for one minute. That conspiracy of theirs which posed such a threat to the world and the country and even to that very town in which they lived. That very town! This despite the fact that there wasn't a single black person living there, nothing but good, hard-working, god-fearing white people. Because those other people were on their way, those anti-Americans. His father knew that they were. The Jews and the commies along with their dark-skinned stooges. Those people like Martin Luther King, that uppity ni... uppity black man as GB's father used to call him.

Not that GB ever repeated the phrase, you understand. Or at least not that he was able to recall ever having done so when he thought back about it years later. When thanks to the small mercies of selective memory, he was able to recall having heard his father use those words, while his own repetitions of the phrase—repetitions which he had made to anyone and everyone who would listen—seemed to vanish completely. Leaving nothing behind but vague memories of some mild sympathy which he must have felt at the time for those poor, oppressed black people. A sympathy which had to have been there even if he never actually said anything about it outloud. Not to his friends and especially not to his father, for rather obvious reasons.

Why, even brave-hearted Al lacked the courage to do something like that, saying nothing when the old man would start in on one of his rants. And it was only the expression on his face that ever gave away what Al was really feeling as he looked on in silence. Because he wouldn't argue back, and he wouldn't agree, wouldn't say, "You're right, Dad," like GB always did, but rather he would look away or maybe grunt a little. Clearly out of step with the old man and refusing to back him up in the way that his little brother always did. The way that Junior should have done, Al Jr., the elder son and heir. And the favored son as well, the one who was so much like their father, as everyone used to say, unlike his little brother who took after their mother instead: quiet and timid and prone to crying fits. But it was he, it was Al who refused to act in the way that the true heir to a man such as that should have done.

Because Al was always out of step with the old man when it came to the great issues of the day. GB could see it even if their father couldn't. Or at least not until that one day when it all

became so open and so blatant that no one could have missed it, not even a man blinded by fatherly love.

It was the day that Kennedy was assassinated. A day when their father wanted to whoop and howl and celebrate the fact that the guy had finally gotten what he so richly deserved, that Massachusetts liberal who had stolen the election from Nixon. Stolen it outright. After which he had set out to lead the country even further down the road to socialism—and ruination—than what it already was. And so his sudden death had been a time for rejoicing, as GB agreed wholeheartedly. Though as for Al, it was clear from the few words he uttered and from the sad expression on his face that he was feeling something quite different right then. Looking so downhearted on that day that it was almost like he must have been in mourning for the guy or something.

In mourning as so many others in that town appeared to be at the time, acting as though they had actually liked Kennedy for God-only-knows what reason. As though they were going to miss him now that he was gone. And there were so many of them acting that way, saying good things about Kennedy—about that guy whose grave they should have been dancing upon, as his father said more than once—so many Kennedy fans and apologists dominating the local conversation during the following days, that for the first time in his life GB found himself and his father to be in a distinct minority among the occupants of that town. Saying bad things about the dead which nobody wanted to hear, no one but a few of his father's most intimate and most faithful cronies.

And it came as a huge shock to GB to see that the tables had been turned so abruptly and so unexpectedly. That all those people who had quietly gone along with his father before, nodded their heads in agreement whenever he talked about the great international communist conspiracy, were suddenly starting to defy him on this issue. Walking away and shunning him when he began to speak, even arguing back with him, a few of the braver ones anyway. Coming right out and expressing opinions of a sort that GB had never heard spoken aloud before. Opinions that were in direct contradiction to those of his father. And there were so many people acting and speaking in that way, more and more of them all the time as the days went by, that the old man's prestige and his influence over local public opinion seemed to enter into a sudden eclipse. A rapid state of decline from which they were never to recover, as things turned out, so that as the months and years went by, GB and his father were to become ever more the voices crying in the wilderness.

The two of them shouting their warnings to people who refused to listen. Like when his father warned everyone within earshot that Johnson was just as much of a socialist as his predecessor had been, though an even more dangerous one since rather than being all hot air like Kennedy, he was a man who was capable of actually pushing his communist agenda through. Passing that so-called civil rights law during his first year in office as he did. That anti-civil rights law as any sensible person could clearly see. Because civil rights? That law was actually the greatest attack upon people's rights that the country had ever seen. A law that took away a person's right to choose which customers he wanted to serve in his store or restaurant, took away that most basic civil right. And that's not to mention all the other rights that were soon to be lost in the flood of laws that followed, just as his father had warned that they would. Because it wasn't long before other laws were being passed as well, laws that went so far as to take away a

person's right to choose when it came time to sell his house, with the government telling him who he had to sell it to instead. Telling him that he had no rights anymore, no choice, and that he had to sell it to anyone who happened to walk in. Absolutely anyone!

Not that GB was a racist, you understand. Not that he personally wouldn't have sold a house to a black person just as readily as he would to anyone else, but it was the principle of the thing that counted. It was the fact that the government was telling him that he had to sell it to that particular person.

Because that law—those laws—were the greatest injustices ever perpetrated upon the American people. But would anyone in that town listen to his father when he complained about them? Anyone besides GB and a handful of others? No! They preferred to fiddle away while the country burned. And then when the nation's last great hope for salvation came along, when Goldwater gave them one last chance to roll back the tide and save the American Dream, what did they do? Did they take heed of his father's warnings? No, they voted for Johnson. The country, the state, even that town, apparently. They all voted for socialism!

The older people supported it, or at least they went along with it, while the younger people seemed not to care one way or the other, being much too distracted by other things at the time. Al and his friends listening to all the new music that was pouring into the country right then, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and all the rest of them. They were playing those records over and over again, and soon they were even starting to imitate those bands' style and their attitude, a few of them going so far as to form their own garage bands and play covers of that insipid music. And the whole time, those guys were ignoring the real issues of the day as they chased after all the phony fads that they heard and read about instead. Chased after girls as well, something that GB never quite... Something that he couldn't bring himself to... Something that he didn't have the time to do. Okay?

Because GB had a lot more important things on his mind than girls right then. Things like saving the country from socialism. Welfare, Medicare, food stamps, you name it, the government trying to buy people's souls with all the checks it kept handing out, when by all rights the only thing it should have been doing was fighting the commies. Just ask Dad about that, because he could tell you. The government had no business giving money to all those people. The poor, the unemployed. Let them go out and get jobs if they wanted money. Let them earn their own way or let them starve to death, that was what he had to say. All those loafers and cheats, they didn't need the help. And in fact, nobody should be getting any money from the government. Nobody! Not business and not... Well, maybe the farmers and ranchers, because they always need a little help of that sort, you know. Those farmers and ranchers who were his father's main customers...

It wasn't long after his re-election that Johnson blundered his way into a war in Vietnam, one that Goldwater would have handled a whole lot better if only he had been elected. And then with the country at war, the next thing you knew there were local boys a couple of years older than GB who were signing up to go fight. Boys who may not have known what the war was all about, but they knew that their country needed them. That was all. They knew that it was their duty to serve and to fight. To ask what they could do for their country, as Kennedy phrased it in one of his few intelligible speeches.

And there were so many boys from that town who went over there in those days and years without knowing why, Al among them. Al who quit high school and joined the Army as soon as he turned eighteen, joined up against his father's wishes, evidently, as the old man's attitude toward the war was highly ambivalent. Because while he may have been glad to see that we were fighting the communists at last, he didn't seem to trust our leader at all. And so when he heard that his own son wanted to go, it wasn't until after a long and heated man-to-man that he ever gave anything resembling his consent. Grudgingly, hesitatingly, he said yes. Though as he came out at the end of the talk that day, there were tears in his eyes for the first and only time that GB could remember. The old man dry-eyed even on the day when his wife had died a couple of years earlier, as the passing of that mild and obedient woman appeared to have had none of the deep emotional impact upon him which his son's departure for the war so clearly had. The knowledge that his boy, his eldest son, would be going off to fight and perhaps to die. Because it was on that day that the old man cried.

And then once his son was gone, he hardly seemed like himself anymore, moping around and searching for all the news that he could find. Even reading and listening to the liberal media as he maintained a watch on current events that grew still more intense after word came back that Al was in-country. Reading the newspapers and listening to every broadcast he could find on the radio or television dial, and during the whole time he said not a word against the war or even against the commander-in-chief, as though he didn't want to jinx the thing at a time when his son was in harm's way. And then on the day when the bad news arrived, he didn't shout and he didn't explode, but instead he went even more silent than what he had been before. He stared about him with a haunted look on his face, a look that never quite went away altogether even after Al made his return a month or so later. What was left of Al, anyway. A big bunch of medals and a stump for a leg.

That show off! said GB to himself as he watched his brother go hobbling around town. Making sure that everyone saw what he hero he was, how he had gone off and done his part. And how he had thrown away his entire future in the process, as far as GB was concerned. Thrown away the football scholarship that he could have had as he came back from the war a cripple with a cripple's future instead. No more sports for him and probably not many girls either now that he was only half a man. Not much chance that he would ever amount to anything in life.

Unlike GB who had such big plans for himself. Wealth and power. Big dreams that he was determined to turn into realities no matter what the cost. And he didn't have time for any side-trips, he told himself as he approached the age of service with the war in Vietnam still dragging on. No time to be wasted tramping around in Asian jungles. Though it wasn't that he didn't support the war. No, he supported it more fervently than anyone else his age in that town, it appeared. But did that mean that he had to go out and serve in it personally? Take a chance on throwing everything away, his entire future, when there were so many others around who could do the actual fighting? All those losers who had no futures to begin with, those white trash draftees and those volunteer suckers like Al. Those people who either didn't count for anything or else they just didn't care. Because they were the ones to fight the war while GB stuck around and worked on his own plans, his ambitions.

Their father started talking about current events once again after Al was back home. He started ranting about the same old things that he always had, though somehow when he did it

now, it all seemed different in a way. Like his words lacked some of the old fire they'd had before, some of the old certainty as though for the first time in his life, he was starting to have doubts about himself. Perhaps even questioning his entire world-view in light of the fact that he had failed his son on some level or other, failed to protect him through sheer force of will if in no other way. Through that iron will of his which had always achieved so much in the past, but which had somehow fallen short on this occasion, leaving the son disabled and the father disillusioned with himself and the world around him. Dejected and defeated.

Too defeated, or perhaps he was simply too disinterested to offer much help to his younger son when the time came a year or so later that the boy was in dire need of such help. When GB would write or call home from the college which he had gone off to attend at the end of his high school career, pleading with his father for moral support as he described the chamber of horrors into which he had been plunged in that new home of his. That state university in what he had always taken to be a conservative state, but which as it turned out had been completely taken over by the bad guys. Liberals. Commies. Intellectuals. Even hippies!

GB had heard about people like that before, but he had always assumed that they could only be found in far-off places. New York, San Francisco. Not right there in a good, clean-living state like his. Though to his surprise, they seemed to be all around him from the moment he arrived at school. Hippie perverts strolling the campus grounds, anti-war traitors holding demonstrations in its plazas, while the normal, decent people—people such as him—found themselves in a distinct minority. And a rapidly shrinking minority at that as people seemed to change and go over to the dark side almost by the day.

Because as bad luck would have it, GB happened to go off to school just at the time when the hippie nonsense was sweeping its way through the colleges and universities of the nation, reaching all the way into small, out-of-the-way schools such as his own. And in the process, it was not only replacing many of the happy old traditions of college life which he had been looking forward to enjoying, but it was also turning the good people like him into an endangered species. Young people entering that school fresh from the clean, hard-working towns in which they had grown up only to be changed by what they found once they got there, changed by the people they met. So that soon they would start letting their hair grow long, start wearing hippie styles and using drugs. Betraying everything that America stood for by going hippie.

And it would happen all the time with people who seemed just fine when they first arrived. People such as Amy. Poor, sweet Amy who was such a nice girl when she first came to that school a year behind GB, so clearly the product of a good all-American home. And she was so pretty, so innocent that GB quickly lost his heart to her, the first great love of his life—other than business and politics, that is. Because she was everything that he could have wanted in a woman, and those couple of times that he summoned up the courage to touch her, those couple of times that he held her by the hand, they had to be the greatest moments of his life so far. Her hand so small and soft in his, so feminine. And you can just imagine his shock when right out of the blue, she showed up one day with a brand new boyfriend in tow. With a hippie! And when she answered his heartfelt outburst, his, “But what about us?” with an, “Us...?” spoken in a tone as though she had no idea what he could be talking about. As though for her, there had never been an us, never been a romance.

Oh, how his heart broke at that moment. How he stood in stunned disbelief, seeing the woman he had thought was going to be his great love, his wife, not only dump him all at once, but also seeing her go hippie at the same time. Seeing her fall so completely from grace, another victim of what seemed like a wave of evil that was rolling through the school, sweeping all before it with such irresistible force that it was impossible to stop. Impossible even to fight back against in any effective way, as GB had found to his horror on that day shortly after his arrival at college when he had tried to do so. When he had taken on a whole group of those commies and liberals and their brainwashed supporters, explaining a few of the facts to them and telling them what we were doing in Vietnam, what we were fighting for over there. Because no sooner had he finished speaking than they had risen up against him en masse, tearing into his arguments one after another and throwing out all sorts of arguments of their own about things that he had never even heard of before. Arguments that he'd had no idea how to counter. So that after a few minutes of fruitless flailing, he had finally been forced to resort to the one and only weapon which he still had left at his disposal. Forced to answer with a little... you know, a little good old all-American name-calling. When suddenly the gloves had come off completely, those perverts calling him every name imaginable, every name that they had for people who supported the war. And in the process they had subjected him to a bullying far worse than anything he had ever suffered as a child.

Worse because while that earlier teasing had been done for all the usual childish reasons, because he was overweight and a sissy and bad at sports, this new teasing was aimed at everything that he believed in. Everything that his father had taught him and everything he valued. Everything that he was as a man and a citizen. An assault so horrendous that while he may have learned after that first disastrous encounter that it was best to keep his opinions to himself, best not to speak out again and invite any further attacks, still the pain refused to go away. Those words continued to sting each time he recalled them, each time he heard them used again in those attacks which people so frequently launched upon the war and society and the capitalist system. Upon everything that he held dear. They hurt him deep inside even if he said nothing back. Nothing to anyone but a few of his most trusted friends, those other business majors he knew to have no liberal tendencies whatsoever.

In public, though, he made no answer while being subjected to those endless rounds of harassment and bullying, those constant attacks upon everything that he believed in, as instead he resorted time and time again to that trusty old childhood tactic of his. Looking back calmly at those people as they insulted his country—and himself by proxy—while speaking only to himself. Repeating those old-time phrases: I'm gonna own this guy someday. I'm gonna buy him and sell him.

After he had become rich and powerful, that is. After he had emerged from the young conservative underground within which he was forced to live while at school and then entered the real world. The business world. That place where he was sure to find that there were a lot more people who thought like him than they did like those jerks back at college. All those phony intellectuals, those liberal arts majors. Those losers! Because there weren't going to be very many of them around once he entered the halls of real power. Money power. Those halls within which he knew that he was destined to make his future home.

As is so often the case with plans and dreams of that sort, however, there turned out to be quite a few more obstacles in GB's path to success than what he had been anticipating while in school. So many more that as the months rolled by following graduation, he felt at times as though he were stuck in a bad dream. A nightmare in which the road ahead kept stretching out, growing longer and longer with each step he took so that his destination receded ever further into the distance rather than drawing nearer as he walked along.

Because it was during those first months out of school that he found himself paying the price of the decision which he had made back in his sophomore year to head for one of the nation's biggest cities when the time came to begin making his future. Convinced that the only place in which a person can truly make it big in life is in a big city. Bigger than anything to be found in his home state. But with that city being so far from his roots, it meant that he was forced to start completely from scratch once he got there, with no connections of any sort, not through old family friendships and not through his university either. On top of which he had no capital with which to start a business of his own, nothing but his brains and ambition and his college diploma. That diploma which unfortunately turned out to be virtually useless in his new home, making no impression upon the people to whom he described it as he began his rounds of the city's leading firms. A degree from a college which most of the recruiters had barely heard of, situated in a state of whose existence they were only vaguely aware, so that to them that piece of paper was worthless. Not even good enough for the offer of a job in the mail room, a job at the very bottom of the ladder.

Not in the big firms and not in the small ones. Not in any of the various companies and industries in which he solicited employment. Not at the top of the evolutionary scale and not at the bottom—the bottom of what could be called the evolutionary scale if only there were any such thing as evolution, that is. If only it were anything more than an invention, a part of the great liberal conspiracy to undermine the dignity of the human race.

Nowhere at all could he find a job. Nowhere along that scale, whatever its true name should be. And then as the weeks and months rolled by, as disappointment followed disappointment, he struggled ever harder to keep up his courage, reminding himself again and again that no one ever started at the top, unless he happened to inherit it, of course. While for everyone else, they had to start at the bottom. Rockefeller, Carnegie, they all had to work their way up from nothing.

Some of them from even further down than the point at which GB was finally able to make his start in life. Able to put an end to the frustration and begin his rise at last following a rare stroke of good fortune in which he finally landed a job. And a good job it was going to be, he told himself as he looked ahead with renewed optimism. Working for a good company with a long and storied history, not to mention the bright future which it still had before it.

Or at least what he had thought was going to be a bright future back on the day he accepted the job. Before he showed up for his first day of work only to discover that the company was actually on its last legs. Teetering on the brink of total collapse while everyone working there was scrambling to get out in any way that they could, desperately seeking jobs with anyone who would take them and leaving gaping holes in the company's staff such as the one that GB was brought in to fill. GB who despite his complete lack of knowledge or

experience within that industry—within any industry other than his father’s feed store—was at least ready and willing to learn. Willing to take a berth aboard what looked to be a sinking ship, manned only by fresh young faces such as his own and by the last of the long-time company deadwood, those employees who were so useless that no one else would hire them, leaving them with no alternative but to stay aboard and ride that ship to the bottom.

The motley crew of the next Titanic, everyone around town was calling them behind their backs. A bunch of losers who didn’t have a chance in the world. And you know in the end, all those naysayers were very nearly right. Almost but not quite. Because while the company lost business and income and staff during the first year that GB was there, somehow it never quite went all the way under. It managed to stabilize itself instead after a long, steep plunge, very low in the water and a mere shadow of what it had been before, but still it was afloat. Still it was doing business and giving GB his paychecks week after week. Paychecks which may not have been very big, but at least they were steady. At least they were enough for him to get by on.

Not nearly big enough to begin building up the capital that he wanted, however. The capital he would need if he was ever going to go into business for himself. And then on top of that, when it came to making the sorts of personal and business connections that could someday prove so valuable, he seemed to be going nowhere at all. He hardly fit in even at the office in which he worked, a misfit among the misfits. All those guys with their big sideburns and their wide ties while GB preferred to look and dress like a normal person instead, traditional suits and short hair. And since he was always so quiet and reserved when the others were laughing it up and having a good time, he soon became known as the office square, the outcast. A man with no real friends among them, only business associates who could never do him any good. Never in a million years. Not when it came to the office politics of that now rather anemic company, and certainly not in any future quest that he might undertake to start a business of his own. Not even in the occasional attempts he made to move on to a better and more prosperous company.

Or in other words, GB found that there was no way for him to move up to the next rung in his climb to the top. Found that he was becoming ever more deeply mired in a hopeless, futureless rut with each passing day, each passing month and year as the early seventies dragged along. Trapped on a dead-end street, with his professional life going nowhere while when it came to a personal life, the truth was that he didn’t even have one. No friends to speak of, not like those closet-conservative friends he’d had back at college, and no way to make any either. Not when he detested everything about the culture and attitudes of those days in which he was forced to live, everything that the people around him seemed to like.

So that if it hadn’t been for disco! Sweeping in at mid-decade and bringing with it a whole new style, a new way of life that had nothing hippie about it at all. Not like that so-called hip-capitalism which he so detested, all those businessmen of his generation running around like a bunch of half-reformed hippies in weird-looking suits, paying lip-service to all that phony “social consciousness” garbage which the commies and liberals had been pushing for so many years. Because with the arrival of disco, suddenly people stopped pretending to believe in any of that nonsense anymore as they came out openly for good old American values instead. For materialism and self-interest and money. Especially for money. They began to admit once again after all those years of darkness and ignorance that wealth was the one and only true value, the source of all status and prestige. Just as it always should have been.

And GB found it all so refreshing, so liberating, that he quickly fell in love with disco. Not that he cared for the jungle music they played in the clubs, mind you. He preferred country music instead, clean-living country, not that honky tonk junk. And not that he was willing to go to clubs where he was likely to find a lot of blacks or those... you know, those funny guys, those... homosexuals. Though as long as he stuck to the good, all-American clubs, he loved everything about disco and disco-culture. He loved dressing up in the most expensive clothes he could find and then throwing his weight around like he was some kind of big-shot. Flaunting what he had for all to see as he began to go out at night for the first time in years, the first time since college. And while he may not have been the best dancer in the clubs he frequented, may in fact have been among the worst, still he knew in his heart that he was making an impression. Making friends who recognized him as one of their own, one of the in-crowd and a cool guy now after so many years of marginalization and rejection. So that with the arrival of disco, he found himself starting to thrive at last, coming out of the shell which he had built up around himself and coming into his own. Finally beginning to flower in his fast-advancing twenties.

And in fact, it was thanks to disco that GB finally met the love of his life after all those frustrating years of looking at women from afar but being unable to touch, unable to take a single step in the direction of first base. Because first of all, it had taken him years to get over the pain from Amy and her cold-hearted betrayal of his trust. Years during which he had been too afraid of further heartbreak to make the least attempt at meeting women. And then when he had finally gotten far enough beyond those fears to start trying once again, on the three or four occasions that he did, oh how the rejections had stung him. That fast and final, "No!" and the even more biting way in which that pretty secretary at the place he worked had laughed right in his face when he asked her out, just laughed and laughed while not even bothering to say the word no. That had been humiliating, so humiliating.

But then along came disco and suddenly everything changed. Because somehow it didn't seem so threatening anymore for him to go up and ask a woman to dance, being rejected much of the time, and especially so when he would ask for a second dance. After the woman had seen him in action. Though as he received those rejections time and time again, he no longer let them get to him in the way that they would have a year or two earlier, having learned by then how to brush them aside. She probably doesn't like dancing all that much, he would say to himself, or, She probably already has a boyfriend. So that there was no reason for him to stop trying, no reason not to keep looking.

Because sooner or later lightning was bound to strike. Love was bound to come his way as it finally did on the night he met Jennifer, a lady he couldn't remember ever having seen around town before. A wallflower though a pretty one, GB thought when he first saw her. Kind of pretty anyway, when the light hit her in a certain way. And then as he started walking over to ask her to dance, as their eyes met for the very first time, suddenly there was electricity in the air. Love at first sight. GB was sure of it as he saw her respond, saw her sit up straight all at once, practically throw herself into his arms when he stopped and bowed slightly and began to pour on the charm. Swept off her feet by the gallant gentleman as she said an enthusiastic yes to that first dance and to the second and the third. Those dances during which her form was nearly as bad as his own, though she danced without the least self-consciousness, unafraid to display her feeble talents to him and completely unconcerned about what anyone else might have been thinking. Because on that night, there were only the two of them in the entire world.

That night and the next night for dinner and more dancing, followed by more dinners and more nights of dancing and even a few breakfasts as the two of them tossed aside some of their long-time morality in that wild, crazy whirl. That fast life of disco and courtship within which they found themselves immersed, living for the moment and being driven to such passion, such a frenzy that finally they could hold themselves back no longer. Incapable of stopping themselves from... from... doing you-know-what even before they were married.

Though married they would be several whirlwind months later. Married and starting out on a life together as they set up housekeeping and planned their future, or at least as they did what they could to plan ahead for a future that still looked like such a dead-end economically. Because despite everything, despite his change in attitude and confidence level and clothing styles, and despite his change in living arrangements as well, GB's professional life was still as stagnant as ever. Going nowhere fast while at the same time Jennifer's career was every bit as bad, every bit as hopeless.

And there is no telling what might have become of the two of them over time, no telling how long their lives might have gone on in that same dull way, had it not been for certain events which took place back in GB's old hometown. Back where his mother had died many years before, just as he was entering high school. A victim indirectly, perhaps, of the difficult life which she had been living, of all those years of cooking and cleaning and doing as she was told, those years of repressed emotions and stifled opinions thanks to that husband of hers. And a victim more directly of the tobacco which had been her only consolation at the time, a cigarette constantly in her hand until finally one day when the lung cancer got her.

Because it was there that GB's father was to die as well, a year or so after the wedding took place. Just as the seventies were drawing to a close. The old man forced to give up his long fight at last, his lonely struggle to stand up for the American Way against all comers, as evidently his heart could take the strain no longer. As tragically it gave out on him just at a time when victory was almost in sight, with the beginning of the Reagan Revolution barely more than a year away.

When GB's father died, he did so without leaving a will, or at least without leaving one that dealt with the disposition of his worldly goods. Because when the attorney pulled out the document and began to read it that day, it turned out to be nothing more than one long final rant about all the things that he had spoken of so often during his life: a rambling and repetitious series of warnings about the dangers posed by the communists and the pinko-liberals and the UN and the Tri-Lateral Commission, not to mention complaints about the country's social and moral decline. About the hippies and the faggots and the drug-fiends. And of course there were multiple warnings about the steady dilution of the Old American Stock, about all the immigrants who were being allowed to come into the country, most of them coming from what he referred to as the inferior races.

And so the attorney read on and on. Until finally somewhere around page six or eight, he paused and asked those present if it would be okay for him to skim the rest in search of the statement declaring who was to receive the store and the house. But then as some minutes later he came to the end of that small book without ever having found anything of the sort, he looked at Al and GB and Jennifer and told them that they would have to leave it up to a judge to make

that decision for them. A decision which would undoubtedly be to the effect that everything should be divided equally between the two brothers, Al and GB becoming partners and half-owners of both the feed store and the family home.

GB wasn't sure that he liked what he heard on that day, having no desire to become involved with either of those two things, not with Al and not with the store. Because he had no intention of dropping all the dreams of success which still dwelt within him by coming back home and becoming a simple store owner like what his father had been. And that's not to mention the fact that the store in question had been struggling so badly in those years, ever since agribusiness started moving in, taking over more and more of the best land. Because with those companies using their own national supply chains to get what they needed, the customer base of the store had been shrinking year after year, with only the last remaining independent ranchers—they along with that new breed of amateurs who owned a few acres and kept a few animals—still buying their supplies at the store. And what that long, drawn out contraction of the store's income meant was that its value if sold had been dropping as well, its capital worth having fallen off dramatically.

And even less attractive than the prospect of running the store was the idea of being partners in it with Al, of working day after day with that brother of his. That loser. Because just as GB had predicted years before, Al had never made anything of himself after his return from the war. He had spent a little time at college, a semester here and a semester there, but he had never earned a degree, and instead his life over the last decade or so had been nothing but a series of part-time jobs and disability checks, and of course a lot of booze and drugs. And in fact over the last few years, the only thing he had done besides drinking and using drugs had been to help the old man around the store from time to time. So that while now he would obviously be content to continue on in that same dissolute way, barely scraping by on the dwindling revenues of the store, there was no way that he would ever have enough money to buy out his brother's share. No way to take over the business and run it completely on his own, which meant that the two of them were going to be stuck with each other whether they wanted to be or not.

GB didn't like the situation one bit, though unfortunately he didn't know what he could do about it. Because what he wanted to do was to get as much capital as he could out of the store and the house and then use it to launch his real career at last, but he could see no way ever to accomplish that. Nothing to do but to sell the house for whatever he could get and then let his brother keep the store for free while he returned to the city in which he had been living. Returned to that dead-end job in that dead-end city, the fresh new capital in his pocket nowhere near enough to do anything with as he threw away what looked to be the one and only opportunity he would ever have to make something of himself. The one big shot at realizing his life-long dream.

Oh, how he hated the idea of doing something like that, of letting it all slip away. And so it came almost as a revelation when he awoke on the morning of the funeral with a fresh new idea in his head, a different idea and a brilliant one if he did say so himself. A plan which seemed to have sprung to life out of nowhere as he slept, emerged fully formed in the morning, ready to be set into motion. A plan in which... Now why didn't I think of that before? GB asked himself as he ran it through his head one more time, watching how neatly all the pieces fell into place, with no gaps and not even any rough spots.

Because just think about it. Here they were in what had to be the Democrats' dying days, with the Carter administration stumbling from one disaster to the next while over on the Republican side Reagan was the clear front-runner. Reagan who meant what he said when he spoke, meant to do away with all those rules and regulations which had been choking the economy for so long. Meant to open up the country, and especially the West, to a whole new era of growth. An era of exploiting the land and its resources. So that right there in that town where GB grew up, that resource-rich western town, there was sure to be a boom in the coming years. One like the country hadn't seen in decades. And then once that boom was underway, there was no telling how much money a person might be able to make by sticking around right there, no telling how big an empire he might be able to build for himself in that very town. And even if that empire could never be more than a local one, GB never more than a big fish in a small pond, still it might lead to something much bigger later on. Because if a fish like him were ever to become big enough, he might just find some way to make his pond a whole lot bigger as well, a way to expand it and expand it until it came to include the neighboring towns and the county and maybe even the entire state. Maybe the entire country.

So bearing that long-term plan in mind, what was GB's first logical step? What was the first thing he would need if he wanted to implement that grand vision of his? Capital, of course. And not just the pittance that could be raised by selling the store, but he needed real capital instead. He needed the type of capital that only a smart operator like him could raise, a guy who had the guts to follow through and pull off the sort of scheme that he had heard people whisper about over the years. A scheme which wasn't exactly legal perhaps, though at the same time it wasn't exactly illegal, being instead one that balanced at some point between.

And the thing that made it all possible was the fact that, despite the feed store having been losing business for many years, his father had always managed to keep the place debt-free thanks to those old-fashioned business practices of his. So that while the store may not have been thriving, still it could be worth a lot of money to someone who knew how to leverage it, as the expression goes. Worth a lot more as collateral against borrowed money than what its outright sale could ever bring in. And so the whole secret to the success of his plan was to keep the place going, to keep Al operating the store as a sort of kinder, gentler and more open-minded version of their father, while GB would take care of what he called the "financial side." While behind his brother's respectable front, he would use the store's borrowing-power to begin laying the foundations of his empire.

It didn't take long to finalize the agreement between the two brothers as Al swallowed GB's plan hook-line-and-sinker, agreed to take a majority interest in the store while leaving the house to GB and Jennifer. A majority though hardly a controlling interest since he left most of the real power, the money power, in the hands of his little brother. With Al running the day-to-day operations, the sales and customer relations, while somewhere in the shadows GB pulled the real strings. While he set out first of all to mortgage the place to the hilt, borrowing every penny he could get on it, not to mention on the house, and then using the money to buy up a nearly defunct logging company in town. Betting in that way on a Reagan victory in the upcoming elections and a revival of logging in the nearby mountains. And then no sooner did he have that company in hand than he incorporated it in such a way as to insulate it from all the debts which had been run up in its purchase, making the new company appear debt-free so that it could be leveraged into even more debt, more loans which he then used to buy still more assets around

town. New assets of all sorts which he quickly leveraged as well and used the money to buy up more and more, to buy everything he could get his hands on around there: parts or all of various local companies along with real estate, all the commercial real estate he could find. And he bought up so much of it so quickly that within a short period of time, he had become the town's biggest landlord and one of its most prosperous citizens. On the surface, anyway. The sole owner of a whole series of newly established corporations, some of which held valuable assets, held them debt-free thanks to that part of his plan, while others consisted almost exclusively of the debt which he had been building up so relentlessly. Paper companies with nothing to be seized should he ever happen to default on one of his loans, so that in that way all his real assets were protected, including the old family home in which he and Jennifer lived. Everything but the feed store, that is. The one and only Achilles Heel in the entire plan. The one asset which he had to leave vulnerable so as not to give anything away to Al.

Because GB preferred to keep his brother in the dark, keep on fooling him in the way that he had with the initial loans on the store, having told him at the time that the papers he was signing were merely routine, while later on he never said a word about the store's debt. Tried to leave the impression instead that all his purchases around town were being paid from his own savings or from the investments he had made during his years in the big city. Tried to keep the true source of his funds hidden, as unknown to that brother and so-called partner of his as it was to everyone else in town. All those people who took him at his word as the local boy made good, back home now to invest his money there.

It was a risky game that he was playing at first, however, and it nearly collapsed like a house of cards on more than one occasion when he was forced to scramble heroically before looming defaults. And in fact it wasn't until after his bet on a Reagan victory had finally begun to pay off that he ever managed to get himself out of the danger zone. Winning his bet that the logging industry would soon be booming around that area as all those liberal environmental extremists who had been running the show were sent scurrying, run out of town and replaced by far more sensible people. By people who thought just like GB. Because no sooner had America's greatest president swept into power than he began to appoint a whole series of brilliant people to his administration: Haig to take on the Russkies and Stockman to deal with the tax-and-spenders. And at the same time he appointed a man who would turn out to be the most effective Secretary of the Interior that the country has ever had. James Watt, a man whose name has become synonymous with far-sightedness in the management of the nation's resources. A man who, in other words, did exactly what GB thought he should have been doing.

He rolled back one after another of those commie/liberal conservationist programs which GB had never been able to understand in the first place. Because what could the people behind them have been thinking about in the first place, wanting to leave all those trees just standing around out there in the forests? Out where they did no good for anyone, with no one cutting them down and turning them into lumber and pulp—turning them into money. No one making a profit and the country making no progress, as all we were left with were trees and trees and more trees. And if it happened that the trees grew very slowly in the mountains around that town of his, well so what. Was that a valid excuse for not cutting them down? They would grow back eventually, so why bother protecting them? Why place so much more value on a bunch of trees than you do on people? On jobs. On money!

Mr. Watt seemed to understand all that, or at least he followed the sorts of policies that a person who understood it would have followed, so that the end result was the same. And GB cared nothing about the mean-spirited things they had to say about him in the liberal media, making fun of the guy and claiming that he based his policies more upon his view of the Bible than he did upon his views of economics or the environment. Because as long as he kept handing out those leases for next to nothing, what did his motivations matter? So let the Bible go on telling him that it was our duty to “occupy the land” until Jesus makes His return, with the word occupy evidently being taken as a synonym for use it up completely. And let him go on believing that with the second coming being somewhere just around the corner, due to take place at any moment, we had better hurry up and finish “occupying” the land before He gets here. Better show our love for Him and our gratitude by stripping the place bare, leaving not a single barrel of oil in the ground, not a single tree standing.

GB didn’t care if the guy believed in those things as long as his policies were good for business. Good for logging which was the main thing that interested him right then. Because with the arrival of Reagan and Watt, it wasn’t long before he was starting to thrive. His logging business, the crown jewel of his fast-developing local empire, was growing quickly and bringing in more money all the time. Creating a steady cash flow which he was able to turn around and invest in whatever there was to be had around there, not just the real estate and small businesses with which he had started, but before long he was branching out to snatch up a couple of small ranches with development possibilities, not to mention buying whatever oil and mineral rights he could pick up cheaply. Buying them despite the fact that there had never been any signs of oil in that region while gold and silver mining had played out a century or so before. But since you never knew what was going to happen next, and since Watt and his people were practically giving those public assets away, GB saw little risk in it. And in fact, with as much money as he had coming in during those first years of the eighties, it kept getting harder all the time to find new things worth buying in that vicinity. Things to do with all his cash besides paying off those old and still-mounting debts which he preferred instead to roll over and roll over again.

It wasn’t long before he decided to tear down the old family home in which he and Jennifer had been living and replace it with something better. Something bigger and more ostentatious as befitted his fast-rising status: the town’s leading businessman and its wealthiest resident, or at least its soon-to-be wealthiest resident if he wasn’t there already. Because he was in the big-time now, and he wanted everyone to know it, wanted them to think of him every time they saw his big mansion looming over the town. And whenever he went out in public in those days, he wanted to show everyone that he knew how to dress the part as well. He who had dumped his disco styles almost on the day of his arrival and taken up a western-businessman look instead. Hat and boots and western suits. The whole thing moving so far upscale as his little empire grew and grew that soon it began to shade over into something of a Wall Street Cowboy look.

And strut? GB was fast learning how to walk the walk, learning to show people who and what he was by his posture, his stride. He was learning to show them that he was the boss around there, the most powerful man in town and someone you had better not cross. Someone you had better learn to respect and obey, because if he didn’t own everything in the region yet, it was only a matter of time before he would. Before he’d own everything and everyone in that entire town, buying them and selling them at will as he had dreamed of doing all those years before.

Giving out his orders and seeing them obeyed since no one would dare to take him on anymore, no one would dare to question his authority.

And his sense of authority seemed to grow almost by the day as he got better at flexing his economic muscles. It grew so fast that GB soon began to forget what open opposition was all about, forget how it felt to have someone say no to him about anything that he wanted, not the people who worked for him and not the other, less-successful businessmen with whom he dealt and not anyone else. Not until that one day, anyway. That day when he nearly pushed his luck too far, nearly got himself into trouble.

It happened one fine summer day during the year in which the Reagan Revolution was at its very peak, rolling along like a complete juggernaut and overwhelming what little opposition there may still have been. Reagan was cruising to a landslide re-election in the voting to be held that fall, and at the same time the economy was starting to build momentum at last. Creating what to the casual observer must have looked like prosperity, though it was a prosperity that fails to stand up to closer examination since so much of it was built upon the flimsy foundation of a fast-growing debt, both public and private. The country getting “rich” on borrowed money. And then when it came to foreign affairs, Reagan surely must have appeared to the casual observer to have been doing just as well, perhaps even in the process of winning the Cold War at last, if only through the simple expedient of outliving his opposition. With America’s ancient Cold-Warrior-in-Chief hanging tough while the ancient Stalinist Apparatchiks on the other side were falling like flies. Brezhnev who had died nearly two years before, while his successor Andropov had lasted little more than a year, so that at the time the country was being run by Chernenko, a man so old and sickly that he was to die as well within a matter of months. And what that long string of deaths at the top meant was that the Soviet empire seemed to have fallen into a state of complete drift in those days. Even their decision to boycott the Olympics that summer having no impact upon America’s triumphalist psyche. Or at least not the sort of impact that they must have been hoping for since rather than moping or complaining about it, the Americans were cheering themselves hoarse as they watched their country rack up medal after medal. And they cared nothing about the fact that a lot of those victories were completely hollow since so many of the best countries weren’t there. All they cared about was the fact that we kept winning and winning and winning. U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!

The people cheering while the “Revolution” did its work, while it set out to remake almost every aspect of American life in its own image, impelled along by its radical wing whose most active component consisted largely of thirty-something baby boomers. Right-wing boomers who had seized upon the Reagan ascendancy as their opportunity to rise up against the “establishment”—against the so-called liberal consensus of the post-war years, in this case—and to launch a rebellion which in many ways was a direct inversion of the boomer-fueled rebellion of an earlier decade. Almost as though it were the Bizarro-World twin of that other rebellion, with youngish conservatives acting out in ways that strangely echoed the years-ago actions of their left-wing peers. And in fact, some of those right-wing rebels had actually been participants in the earlier uprising, having swung far to the right in the intervening years before renaming themselves neo-conservatives and joining forces with the life-long conservatives of their generation. With all those angry and resentful, long-frustrated conservatives who had been waiting so many years for a chance to push their own longed-for agenda at last: the undoing of everything that had been done over the last few decades.

And in the process, those boomer conservatives were demonstrating once again their generation's propensity for fanaticism and radicalization and rebellion. Its dislike of compromise and its endless fascination with maximalist solutions. Repeating in their own rightward way a pattern which has been so poorly understood by most of those who have tried to examine it or explain it over the years. Because while many people have studied that generation and its "great rebellion" of the sixties, most of the ideas and explanations which they've had to offer have been so misguided and mistaken as to be utter nonsense, a complete waste of time. Ideas such as the one about the rebellion having been largely the result of permissive parenting, a patently ridiculous claim which ignores the fact that later generations have been raised even more permissively than were the boomers while none of them have rebelled in the same way. So that the whole idea has to be dismissed out-of-hand by any thinking person, an explanation so far off-base as to be laughable.

No! The baby boomers' tendency toward rebellion can be much better explained by taking into account the fact that they were a transitional generation. They were the first generation to be raised in the prosperous consumer society of the post-war years, so that everything they did became a matter of blazing new trails. There were no old trails for them to follow, only vague and poorly-defined paths. But then at the same time that they were entering and creating a new world with each step they took, they still had one psychological foot planted squarely in the ideas and values of an earlier generation, their parents' generation. They grew up dreaming of someday doing the same sorts of things that their parents had done, saving the world and the people in it and accomplishing great things. And so it came as quite a shock to them when they first began coming of age only to discover that there were no more worlds left for them to conquer. That instead of taking on great and earthshaking tasks, their only mission in life was to consume, to become the types of mindless consumption-machines that the modern economy required. And it was precisely against that future that so many boomers rebelled as they entered their late adolescence and early adulthood. It was in defense of their right to define their own role in what they saw as a still-fluid and evolving society. Their right to choose their own destiny and to make their own history.

Or in other words, they showed their initial unwillingness to accept what was being forced upon them by history and society in the same way that other transitional generations have rebelled and resisted. The transitional generation of workers, for instance, which was the one that led all the great proletarian uprisings in whatever country they occurred. A generation which in each case still had one foot planted in village life, psychologically if not physically, and which fought against the new status of a subservient working-class which was being forced upon it by the economic system. Fought with a level of conviction and ferocity that none of the later generations would ever display, those generations which were far more ready to accept their new social position—or were at least they were more resigned to its inevitability. Their status as faceless cogs in the great industrial machine.

Well, the baby boomers rebelled in much the same way and with much the same sort of conviction. They saw what they thought was a chance to redirect history, and they jumped at it. The counter-culture, the anti-war movement. They committed themselves to those things heart-and-soul. For a little while at least. Until disillusionment and advancing maturity began to set in and they drifted off one by one, leaving the "movement" behind and making their peace with the consumer society instead. Going mainstream in such numbers as the late sixties and early

seventies advanced that within a few years the boomer rebel had virtually disappeared from the face of the earth, a cultural relic on the fast track to oblivion. And it wasn't until the arrival of the Reagan Revolution that finally a whole new variety of the species was to make its public appearance, boomer conservatives who were just as committed and just as sure that they had found their cause at last, their opportunity to remake the world as they saw fit. Their opportunity to reverse everything that their left-leaning compatriots had done, every cause they had supported, while rolling back just about everything else that had happened over the last twenty years or so: the Great Society, the New Frontier, perhaps even the entire New Deal. Or you know, when you get right down to it, why not try to abolish the entire Twentieth Century? Why not try to bring back that good old Nineteenth Century Laissez Faire Utopia which the country once enjoyed those many years ago. Back before the liberals destroyed it. That Golden Age of America's past which they were sure must have existed at one time, knew for a fact to have existed since they had seen it with their very own eyes. Seen it in those old movies.

As for GB, he went along with most of what those boomer-conservatives stood for, though he didn't always feel the same level of enthusiasm for the political issues that he did for the economic ones, being interested mainly in those issues which affected him personally. Those issues which might in some way contribute to his quest for the things that he wanted in life. Money. Power. Status. So that when it came to the ideas being battled around by the more philosophically-minded members of the New Right, he took them or left them as he saw fit. As he saw them contributing or not to the accomplishment of his goals. Deregulation? He was all for it as long as it didn't cost him any money. Greed is good? A brilliant idea which helped to soothe his conscience on those rare occasions when it acted up. The golden rule? Not the old one about doing unto others, but the new conservative version of that rule. The one that says, "The guy with the gold is the one who should rule." Those words quickly became GB's motto in life, and he came to take them ever more seriously as his own pile of gold grew larger.

A motto to live by, and one for others to live by as well, he would say to himself. And he was always pleased to see how many of the people around town seemed to abide by it as well, those people who treated him with more and more respect, more deference all the time as his wealth increased. Moving aside to make way for him when he passed by, words of respect to greet him as befitted the biggest man in town, the richest and most powerful. All of them treating him in the way he deserved, or almost all of them, anyway. All except that one jerk he ran into that day.

It happened on a quiet summer day, a Saturday morning on which he was following what had become something of a weekly routine with him, making the rounds of the town and surveying a few of his properties on a day when there was little else going on. Little or no action at the logging company or any of his other more serious enterprises, so that Saturdays were a good time to see how things were going elsewhere in his little empire. A time to drive or walk past some of the buildings he owned, stopping off to chat with any of the business owners he might encounter, and also stopping by for a cup of coffee in that one particular place, the Uptown Café over on the street by the railroad tracks. That place which he had bought some time back, the land and the building, and which he was now leasing out to its long-time "owner." And that place where he knew that there would be a certain waitress working there that morning. A waitress who...

No, quit that! Seeing that waitress had nothing to do with GB's motives for going to the Uptown every Saturday morning. Not when he was a happily married man, so it had to be pure coincidence that he always happened to go there on one of the days when she worked. It couldn't have been anything else. It couldn't have been planned that way or anything of the sort. Not by him. So it had to be luck instead, pure luck that he happened to see her each and every week. It had to be... coincidence.

Cindy Something-or-other. It was hard to say what her last name could be anymore given all the husbands she had been through in the years since high school. Since those days when GB remembered her as being the prettiest girl in the entire school and the one he always had such a huge crush on while growing up. A girl who any boy with a lick of sense would have had a crush on. But then he had lost track of her when he went off to college and she got married right out of high school, pumped out a couple of kids before getting divorced within a few years, after which she had turned around and gotten married for a second time, divorced a second time, and perhaps a third time of each as well. GB couldn't say for sure. All he knew was that she was single at the present moment, between marriages as a cynic might put it, and that she was still a very good-looking woman despite the hard life she had been living.

A bit worn perhaps, but still she was so beautiful that each time GB looked at her, he felt waves of what-ifs come flooding into his head. Those what would it be like to make love to some woman besides Jennifer. Someone like Cindy, for instance, a woman who had been so pretty and sought after back at school, with so many of those handsome and athletic boys chasing after her that she had never even noticed that he was alive. Never spoken to him or smiled, never even looked at him. Though now that things had changed so much, now that he had become the richest and most successful man in town, while she was still so...

No, forget about it! He wasn't going to cheat on his wife. He was just going to look, that was all. Maybe dream about it a little bit. Maybe ask himself what he might be missing out on, but he would never try to go beyond that. Never in a million years. Never try to pick up on her, never ask her to go out and then try to... you know, try to get her to... you know.

As GB walked into the Uptown Café that morning, wearing his fancy new cowboy boots and his best Stetson and the bolo tie with diamonds on the slider, he saw most of the usual faces. Most of them though not Cindy who must have been back in the kitchen at the time. And so with no first sighting, no first thrill, he paused by the door for a moment to survey his realm before entering. Acknowledging the various patrons who nodded at him respectfully—those people who worked for him or owed him money, most of them—as he stood regally scanning the small crowd. Until suddenly his eyes froze at the sight of a stranger seated at one of the tables. A black stranger! Sitting right there like he owned the place.

Not that GB was a racist, you understand. Not that it bothered him. But it was just that he couldn't remember ever having seen a black man in that café before. Not like he would sometimes see them at those places over by the highway where just about anybody was liable to drop in. Because this place was different. It was a clean and decent place, an All-American place. The type of... Or wait a minute, was it racist to say that? Was it...? No, it couldn't be. Not in a case like this one, anyway. Not with a black guy who looked as dirty and ragged as this one did. Because he looked nothing like those clean-cut blacks that you see on TV. He looked like a

criminal instead. Like someone who must have broken out of prison or something. Someone you'd better keep an eye on.

Not wanting to call attention to himself, GB only stared for a moment before heading off toward his usual spot at the counter, tearing his eyes away once he had taken in the whole scene. That black guy sitting there with some big white guy seated across the table from him. A white guy who looked so much less threatening, so much less dangerous, that his mere presence made GB feel better about the situation. Almost like the guy was a guarantee of...

"Morning, Mr. Nichols. Ya want some coffee this mornin'?" Cindy said as she made her approach, smiling dutifully.

"Yes, please." His face lit up at her sudden appearance. Lit up in a way that hers never had with him. "And would you call me GB?" he added as he took off his hat and shoved it aside, attempting with those words to break down some of the barrier between them. That barrier which, for some reason, he found himself having to attack anew each and every week.

"Sure GB," she said with another weak smile. And then leaning forward, she began to pour the coffee, GB leaning forward at the same time. She leaning and he leaning. She and he. Until just as she finished pouring, just as she raised her head, suddenly their eyes met.

Close! So intimately close that it sent a jolt running through GB's body, made him jerk backward even against his will. Because the shock of finding himself in a position like that all at once, so near as almost to touch her face, so near as to kiss her had he wanted to. And this on a day when his thoughts had been so much on her. It made that moment far too intense to hide what he felt.

Cindy acted as though she hadn't noticed a thing, however, taking it all in stride in the way that veteran waitresses do. So that the whole thing would have blown over in an instant had it not been for that other guy, that jerk who sat a few spaces away along the counter.

That jerk who just had to jump into the middle of it. "What the fuck games ya playin' with that guy?" he demanded of Cindy with the air of one who felt that he had the right to speak to her in that way. The air of her latest flame.

"I ain't doin' nothin'," she came back in a voice that was more tired than it was angry or defensive. The voice of one who just wanted to be left alone.

"Yeah...?" the guy blurted out in an aggressive tone. Followed by a moment of silence as he appeared to search his dull brain for a better response, until finally he added, "Well, that ain't what it looks like to me."

"Will ya give it a rest, Ray?" Cindy said with weary finality before turning to leave, on her way to attend to her other customers.

And then as GB found himself alone at the counter with Ray all at once, he stared straight ahead, avoiding eye contact even in the mirror behind the counter. Because he didn't want to get into anything with this guy. This... whoever and whatever he was. This guy who had moved to

that town a few years back, coming there from who-knew-where. And a guy who, by the looks of him, must have thought an awful lot of himself, muscles and sharp clothes and pampered hair. Like he saw himself as some sort of lower-class Romeo.

As for Ray, he said nothing to GB or to anyone else, but instead he sat glowering and grumbling to himself, mumbling so loudly that a few of his words were audible. Things like, “lying bitch,” and, “whore.” And then all at once, when he seemed incapable of containing himself any longer, he turned and yelled, “Hey, get over here and gimme some more coffee!” Yelled it so loudly that everyone in the place turned to look at him, some merely glancing over for a second before returning to what they had been doing before, while others continued to stare from where they sat.

And even after Cindy had come over and given the guy his coffee, still those people watched as though they had nothing better to do that day. Nothing but to look at Ray as he berated her from the moment she arrived. As he complained that she wasn’t paying him enough attention, that she should ignore all those other customers and spend her time with him instead. And that she should especially ignore that fat little fuck sitting over there.

Uh-oh! GB’s defenses were up at the sound of those words, higher all the time as the argument went on. As he sat without looking around, not asking for more coffee even though his cup was empty and not getting up to pay. Silent and motionless instead as the lessons of all those years of bullying came flashing back, all those years of abuse. Telling him that the best thing to do was to sit back and take it and wait for the guy to get tired and go away. To protect himself should he be attacked, though he mustn’t fight back under any circumstances since that would only make things worse. And in the meantime, his only recourse would have to be the same old one that he had always used, the words rising up from somewhere deep in his memory. I’m gonna own this guy someday, he heard himself say. I’m gonna...

Hey, wait a minute! What was he thinking about? Someday!? There were no more somedays for him anymore, there was only today. There was only the present in which he already owned everything that there was to own around there, including this guy Ray. Or at least he probably owned the place where the guy worked. So that from here on out, there would be no more waiting, there would only be acting. There would only be standing up and showing people who and what he was. The owner. The boss. Showing it to all those people present and to that jerk Ray and to Cindy. Especially to Cindy.

“That’s enough of that!” he announced with all the authority in his voice that he could muster as he got to his feet and turned to face the guy. Stood in a determined pose while waiting for his order to be obeyed. His command from on high.

Watching as Ray turned to look back at him, bloodshot eyes and a stupid look on his face, a strong whiff of alcohol on his breath. Obviously having spent the whole night drinking and still dead drunk in the morning. Too drunk to answer coherently, too drunk to comply or do anything else but stare back with a vacant look on his face.

So dull and unresponsive that GB knew he would have to try again if he wanted to get through, have to repeat his order. “I said that’s enough of that, so leave her alone!” he said in his

sternest tone while trying to make himself look as imposing as possible. Standing up arrow-straight and puffing out what he had for a chest, or at least sucking in some of his abundant gut. But then as he stood and waited, the only response to be seen on the part of Ray was the hint of a grin. A stupid, drunken grin. And a highly disconcerting one that left GB in limbo, left him asking himself, So what do I do now? Do I threaten the guy? Do I ask him if he knows who I am? Oh, how I wish I'd brought a gun with me today, how I wish I hadn't left them all at home. Not that I'd actually pull it out and use it, of course, but it's just that... I mean, what am I getting myself into? Taking on some drunken a-word like this and doing it in front of all these witnesses. Doing it in front of Cindy.

GB glanced around through the corners of his eyes, looking for a way out or for help or anything else he could find, though he did so without taking those eyes completely off Ray since he didn't want to lose sight of that dangerous and unpredictable... That guy who said nothing and did nothing, just sat there staring and grinning. And unnerving him so completely that he felt frozen in place, afraid to move forward and afraid to flee. With no choice but to continue the staring contest forever or else to open his mouth and try yet again. "I said for you to..."

Whack! Without warning a fist came flying his way. Hey, what the...? Look out! There came the other hand darting out right behind it, grabbing the bolo tie around his neck and yanking down hard, sending a surge of pain through his neck, his whole body. A pain too intense to resist as suddenly GB saw his world on its way to the floor. Halfway there as a knee came shooting up. Bam! And then as the hand released its grip on his tie, he raised his own hands to try to protect himself from the blows that were raining down upon him, pounding on his head and shoulders and slapping at his ears, knees coming at his face. He raised his hands but not his head, afraid to do so even as he began to fight back for the first time ever. Flailing away at the guy's knees and shins, grasping at that lethal leg and starting to get his hands... Bam!! There it came again.

Help! he wanted to yell. Somebody help me!! But nobody did a thing as Ray kept punching and kicking, grabbing him in a headlock now, a reverse headlock that cut off GB's feeble attempts at resistance as the guy leaned over and started in with an open palm. Whap! Whap! Whap! Spanking him right there on the butt. Oh God, how could this get any worse? My dignity, my self-respect!

"Don't you hurt him, Ray!" he heard Cindy yell, the only person willing to help. The damsel he had set out to rescue trying to come to his own rescue instead.

And meanwhile nobody else did a thing as the punishment went on and on, spansks and punches and slaps. Until all at once Ray stopped, released the headlock and halted the pounding. Though even as GB found himself free at last, still he continued to crouch, afraid of what might await him were he to stand up straight. Afraid of the fists and knees. Not daring to raise his head until finally he heard a new and unfamiliar voice speak up all at once, a deep but soft and gentle voice that seemed to come directly at him. "It's okay, mister. It's all over with."

Slowly, gingerly GB raised his head to look around, standing up to see who, to see what. Looking over at last to find that Ray had his arms pinned back by some big guy who stood behind him, some stranger who... Oh, that's right. He must be the guy who was sitting at the

table with that other stranger. That... you know, the black one. He's the guy who finally came all the way over and pulled Ray off me.

GB wasn't sure what he felt at that moment. Gratitude, anger, embarrassment. But then as he saw all those eyes staring at him, grinning, some of them almost laughing at what he had just been through, as he saw Ray so helpless now, so exposed to assault—his face, his stomach, his balls—all those years of frustration seemed to come welling up inside him in a fury to attack. Attack!

"Whoa, hold on mister," the big guy said in a soothing tone as he swung his prisoner around and blocked GB with his own body. "Don't go hurtin' him anymore, cause ya already did enough damage."

"Huh...?" I did what?

"Yeah, ya already won the fight, ya know. Ya already beat him up, so don't go hittin' him again."

I what? GB had no idea what the guy could be talking about. Because how could he possibly have won the fight? How could he...?

"That's right, ain't it, fella? Ya had enough, didn't ya?" The big guy was speaking to Ray now.

"Yeah..." the drunken bum mumbled sullenly.

"Cause he whooped ya, didn't he? He kicked your ass."

Ray said nothing in response to this latest query. Or at least not until a tightening of the big guy's grip sent a visible shudder of pain running through his body all at once. "Yeah, he won, he won," Ray pleaded for mercy.

"Good, I'm glad we got that straight so we don't gotta go arguin' about it anymore," the big man said in a calm but compelling voice. And then after the briefest of pauses, he went on. "And I guess that means the only thing ya still gotta do is pay up and get out. Right? Ya just gotta pay the pretty lady and then move on."

Ray was soon slinking out the door with his head hung in disgrace, and as GB watched him go, he was starting to feel a bit better about what had just happened. He was still very sore, especially around that poor, abused neck of his, but at least some of the embarrassment of a few minutes ago seemed to be dissipating. Not that he or anyone else actually believed that line about his having won the fight, but still it was comforting in a way to have heard those words. Heard them directly from Ray's mouth. And he felt a sense of gratitude toward the big guy that seemed to grow by the second, perhaps even shading into affection. This toward a man of a sort that he normally would have disliked upon first sight, would have resented everything about. Because the guy was so good-looking, so big and strong, bold and brave, all the things that GB hated to see in other men. All the things he used to see in Al those many years ago. Back when he was still a whole man, that is, back when he still had two legs.

But now here he was actually liking this big guy who stood before him, feeling an emotion which he found not only difficult to comprehend but even more difficult to act upon. Because he knew that he had to say thank you in some way, had to show his appreciation for what the guy had just done, though not being the type who ever admits to emotions of that sort, not even with Jennifer, he didn't know what to do. He generally preferred to keep his friendships on a cash basis, putting a dollar value on everything he or they did and saying his thank yous with money. With five dollars, ten...

"Are ya okay? Your neck and all that?" the big guy spoke again. "Ya know that dirty fightin' like that guy was doin'. I hate to see shit like that."

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm uh... I'm fine. I'll be okay."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it."

The guy said nothing about money as he spoke, not even by inference through his tone of voice or his gestures, so it was hard for GB to settle upon a dollar amount to offer him. Would ten dollars be too little? Twenty too much?

It was hard to say with a guy like that since he couldn't have had very much going for him to judge by the company he was keeping. Hanging around with that big... that... That big buck! Someone who obviously came from the bottom of the barrel. A loser. A... And it wasn't because the guy was black that GB was thinking those things about him. Not GB since he wasn't a racist. No, it was because the guy looked so... so untrustworthy. Like he'd rob you and kill you just to get the money to buy drugs.

"If you're okay then..." the big guy began as he started to turn away.

Only to be interrupted by GB. "So are you new around town?" he asked with an urgency that surprised even himself. An urgency to prevent the guy from leaving and to extend this... whatever it was for a little while longer.

"Yeah, I sure am, cause I just got here," the guy answered in the same strangely open and disingenuous way that he had spoken before. "I'm just on my way through."

"Oh, are you? On your way to...?"

"Nowhere in particular," came the vague reply. "I'm just like... I'm lookin' for work..."

"Oh really? What type of work?" GB asked quickly, with an inexplicable sense of expectation.

"Anything. Cause I can do anything, you just name it."

"Anything like... What sort of work have you done before?"

"Oh, different stuff. Lotsa stuff. Like I mostly been shippin' out, but that's gettin' to be... It's all over with, I guess." He mumbled the final words.

What was that? Shipping what? GB had no idea what the guy could be talking about, though not wanting to put his ignorance on display, he nodded back as though he had understood. And then rather than expose his ruse by attempting any sort of direct follow-up, he began instead to probe gently around the subject, asking about other aspects of the big man's past. Asking though not necessarily learning anything specific. Because while the guy may have answered all his questions, and while he may have done so in a tone that sounded as honest and straightforward as anything GB had ever heard, still the content of those answers seemed to be sorely lacking in substance. Where was the guy from? Here and there. And who had he worked for? Different people, different companies.

And it was only when the conversation threatened to die out altogether, the big guy acting like he was about to walk off at any moment, that GB finally decided to ask the question which had been uppermost in his mind all along. To bring up the subject... "Have you ever worked in a logging camp?"

"No sir, I haven't, but I'm sure as hell willin' to try if you, uh... If you're hirin' or ya know someone who is." The guy leaped at the implied offer so quickly that before GB knew what was happening, he found that he had a brand new employee on his hands. One but not two since he had earlier received assurances that only the big guy was in search of employment. Not that friend of his, that...

Now listen, just because GB was opposed to the Civil Rights Movement back at the time, that didn't make him a racist, either then or now. Because the truth is that he always sympathized with those people. He agreed that they deserved more rights. But the problem was with the movement itself, with there being so many communists in it. And you know it's a well-established fact by now that there were communists everywhere in that movement, especially among the leadership. Communists giving orders and telling the rest of them what to do. Because that's what was really happening back then. It's true. You can look it up.

Anyway, with the relationship between the two of them having evolved so quickly into that of employer and employee, GB felt even more comfortable around the big guy than what he had before. Giving the orders for the other man to follow. And as the guy quickly agreed to everything that he was offered, to the wages and the hours and other conditions, he did so with what seemed to GB like a strange and inexplicable passivity for someone who, physically at least, appeared to have so much going for him. Because rather than stand up for himself and demand a better deal, demand higher wages at the very least, he seemed so content with next to nothing. So glad to accept the few crumbs that he was given: a hard and dangerous and not very well paid job setting chokers.

So what could be going on with this guy? GB wondered. This guy who continued to dodge personal questions in that strange way of his even as the new boss began to exercise a few of his proprietary rights by asking them openly. Asking though receiving little in reply beyond vague generalizations or jokes, and all the while the man speaking in a tone of voice that seemed the very embodiment of forthrightness. Almost like he was playing a game of some sort, though one whose rules and motives were completely indecipherable to GB. And in fact, it even turned out that the guy gave him a false name when asked, claiming that people called him Gary when,

as GB was to discover later while doing his payroll, the guy's actual name was something completely different, something that had no connection with the name Gary.

So why would he do something like that? And why would he be hanging out with that other guy in the first place? Riding around on freight-trains together as GB discovered the case to be when "Gary" went over to say goodbye to his "friend." To pick up some funny-looking little bag that he had with him and then say a quick and emotionless see-ya-later. No handshake and not even a look in the eye on the part of either of them before the black guy walked off with a bedroll tucked under his arm. On his way back toward the tracks. Back toward that dissolute and pointless life of his.

It didn't make any sense. None of it made any sense for a guy of Gary's age and apparent assets to be riding around on freight-trains. So then why would he be doing it? This guy who was somewhere around GB's own age, at a time in his life when he should have had a lot more going for him. A steady job and a career at the very least. And on top of that, why did he have that... that...? GB wasn't very good at reading people—on anything other than an economic level, that is—but there was something about the guy that was so noticeable. Something in his eyes and the whole way he carried himself. Like an air of sadness or something. An air of disillusionment, maybe even defeat.

I've got it! The answer came to GB all at once: the guy is a Vietnam veteran. A troubled veteran like the ones you always read about in the papers or see in the movies. And he must have been running away from his demons on a freight-train, using those trains in the same way that Al uses his booze and his drugs.

So there you have it. The first question about the guy had now been answered, the first part of the mould into which he fit had been discovered. Though even with that revelation, still GB felt that he had a lot more questions than he did answers. And by far the biggest and most mysterious of those questions was the one about the source of the emotions which he himself felt toward the guy. That weird affection, that... that interest and curiosity which he felt toward a man who in fact was nothing more than one of his employees. Because why would he feel something like that toward a man like this? What was it about this guy that made him stand out in GB's mind? His emotions? And what was it about him that made it such a comfort to know that Gary was going to be around for weeks or months to come? Working in the woods at a place where GB would be able to find him any time that he wanted.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE NIGHT PRIMEVAL

Yes, the character in the book is going to be working in the woods for the foreseeable future. A seaman working as a logger in much the same way that I myself once did, one summer many years ago. Back at a time when shipping was slow, jobs aboard ship hard to get. Though in truth it wasn't necessity that finally drove me to take that job, not any more than it is necessity which has driven the character to it now, but instead it was more a matter of curiosity than anything else. Hanging around in a small town in the Sierra Nevadas that summer and starting to wonder what exactly it would be like. Wondering if I could handle it, if I was man enough for a

job like that. Wondering if I might actually come to enjoy it. The outdoors, the fresh air. The time spent living and working in the forest.

And defacing it with every move I made, as it often seemed at the time. As it still seems today when I try to think back. So that now as I scan my memory in search of whatever deep and revealing insights I might have to offer into that oft-maligned yet little understood way of life, whatever new and original perspective I might present, I'm afraid that I come up with nothing but blanks. Because never having been more than a casual passer-through in that world, there for a single short summer and gone again without a look back, none of the visions that come to mind go anywhere beyond the superficial. The simple and straightforward, perhaps even simplistic. They are visions of struggle and nothing more, visions of near-warfare: the fallers and buckers coming through an area first to do what damage they might, while the heavy troops would arrive later for the mopping-up. The armored forces—the Caterpillars—rumbling and clanking their way to the site of battle each morning, while we infantrymen—the choker-setters—would trudge along behind.

And we used Caterpillars in the area where I worked since we practiced selective logging around there, cutting individual trees and then skidding them out behind the Cats. Performing our labors in much the same way that they do in the mountains where the character in the book has just gone to work, though despite that similarity there are also distinct differences between the two operations, the two regions. Differences which mainly have to do with the fact that the trees we had to deal with in the old-growth forests where I worked were far bigger than anything that the character in the book might encounter in his more easterly mountains. Enormous trees in some cases, huge cedar trunks that could be six feet, seven feet in diameter.

In the process of preparing those trees for their onward journey, it would be my job as choker-setter to scramble about through piles of trimmed-off branches and wrap wire chokers around the big logs, over and more problematically underneath them. Using two chokers to reach all the way around some of the biggest. And then once I had everything ready, it would be time to sit back and get what rest I could while waiting for the Cat to appear on its return trip from the landing where the logs were being loaded onto trucks. Unhook the empty chokers dragging along behind it once the Cat arrived and then hook on as many of the already-prepared ones as the driver could handle on the next skid. Two, three, four. Only one in the case of the giant trunks. I would hook them on as he maneuvered into position for each log, stand clear after that as I watched him leave, before setting out to repeat the whole process. Dragging those big, heavy wires through bush and branch and wrapping them around the logs to be taken next, finally sitting back for another short rest if time allowed. If the skid was long enough.

Even with the periods of rest that I got, though, still the work was exhausting. So tiring that at the end of my first day on the job, my first ten-hour day, I was too far gone to eat, too tired to do anything but lay spread-eagled on a big rock at our campsite. Too tired to move, too tired even to think about food.

Far more affected by the work physically than was another young man who started working there at almost the same time as me. Tom was his name, a scrawny-looking hippie type of around my own age who, to judge by appearances, couldn't possibly have made it through the first half-day. Though with looks being deceiving as they so often are, he not only made it

through that day, but he seemed to thrive on the hard work. Seemed to grow stronger as the days went by. His body growing stronger, in any case, though it would be hard to make the same claim about the condition of his mind.

Tom was the only real friend I had in that camp, the two of us the only hippie-loggers working there so that we spent most of our free time together. Hanging out with each other during the evenings in camp and listening to whatever we could pick up on the radio while talking about anything that came up. About girls or music or perhaps more serious subjects. And we even made an excursion into the woods together one Monday evening after Tom had scored over the preceding weekend, walked off downwind to smoke a little weed.

And Tom was a great guy, I have to say that he was. One of the best I ever met. Someone I would have trusted with my life, my fortune, maybe even my stash. So I did my best to ignore those brief spells that would come over him from time to time as we sat together in my little trailer. The way he would suddenly start to space out, a strange, faraway look coming into his eyes as he stopped speaking in mid-sentence or stopped listening. Stared blankly into space until finally he would snap back out of it a short time later and then go on as if nothing had happened. He would go on and so would I, writing the episode off as one of those things that you get when dealing with hippies.

There was a day near the end of our third week in camp that the situation seemed to become far more serious, however. A day when Tom seemed to space out completely, that strange look coming over his face and then staying there. His eyes staring sightlessly into the distance and his ears hearing nothing when I called to him, sitting frozen instead for minutes on end like one lost in another world. Lost in an acid reflash, I figured the case to be. And when he finally came back to himself that day, all he said was, "I gotta go. See ya later," before getting up and walking out of the trailer and into the darkness. Off to spend the night in the forest, as I was to discover the next morning.

After that day, Tom only seemed to get worse, his mental condition deteriorating rapidly even as my own physical condition began to improve at last, my body growing stronger while his mind, or at least his grip on reality, grew ever weaker. And in fact, it didn't take long before things had gotten so bad and so obvious that even the older, straight guys in camp began to take notice. Even they began to make comments about him, whispering and making jokes, while the camp clown went so far as to christen him with a brand new name: Tommy Tomorrow.

I wanted to do something to help my friend, but I didn't know what. When I spoke to him, my words didn't seem to reach him anymore, even during his moments of lucidity. Those moments which were fast becoming the exception rather than the rule. Becoming ever briefer, ever fewer and further between, so that our evening sessions together grew more one-sided all the time, with me doing most of the talking while he would gaze off into the distance or look straight ahead with unfocused eyes. Seeing none of the things before him as he sat lost in some distant space instead. In some far-off universe or perhaps somewhere within the deepest recesses of his own mind.

Despite all that, still he continued to do his work in the daytime. Tramping the woods as though nothing were wrong, as though the strange illness of mind which he suffered while inside

the trailer would vanish once he was outdoors. And in fact, on the mornings after a night spent in the woods, those mornings which soon became the norm, he always seemed much more focused than he did on the other days. More himself as though the time spent in open spaces had cured him somehow. Cured him temporarily.

It wasn't long before Tom was spending every night in the woods, wandering off as darkness fell with hardly a word even to me. And then at the end of the fifth or sixth week we were together, that was when his psychosis seemed to take a giant leap forward. That Friday afternoon on which he refused the offer of a ride to town, saying that he preferred to spend the weekend in camp instead. Saying that he didn't mind being stranded out there all alone, without companions or car. And when we asked him about food, he said not to worry about it, he had more than enough.

And so we went off and left him. What else could we do? We left him to his own devices until Monday morning when we all came back together, pulled into camp in our usual weekly caravan with the company van leading the way followed by a small assortment of private cars and trucks. We pulled in, though it was only to find that there was no one in sight, no sign of Tom and nothing to indicate that he had been there recently as the empty camp looked the same as it did on every other Monday. And it wasn't until we were just starting to get into the van for our ride out to the landing to begin the day's work that Tom finally made his appearance. His ghastly and gruesome appearance. Because when he walked into camp that day, the first thing we noticed was the blood, all the dried blood that covered the front of his clothes and his hands and caked his face and beard. Blood everywhere as though he had spent the whole weekend ripping into carcasses with his bare hands and chomping on pieces of raw meat.

The sight was so disgusting that most of the guys quickly turned away, even the camp joker too shocked for a comment or quip, even the foreman too horrified by what he saw to say a word when Tom strolled over to the van and casually got inside. All of them doing their best to avoid eye contact as he did so, though they would stare intently once his back was turned. And they all moved as far away from him as the limited space in that vehicle would allow, so that only I was willing to sit beside him. Only I dared to be near that gory specter with the wild animal look on his face.

But then as I sat there beside him, still I had no idea what to say or do or even where to turn my eyes, while as for Tom, he showed no interest in me or my company. He didn't say hello or welcome back, but instead he sat without a word, without a glance in my direction. And even when we arrived at our destination where everyone got out to set about our labors for the day, our ten hours of setting chokers in Tom's and my case, still he said nothing.

He would make no sign after that when the two of us passed each other out on the skid-trails during the workday—no wave and no smile—and he walked off into the woods alone when the rest of us returned to the landing at midday for our lunch break. Walked off once again when we arrived back at the camp late that afternoon, disappearing for the night as I supposed, though it could just as well have been forever. And so it came as quite a jolt when I looked out the window of my little trailer at one point early in the evening to find him standing there. Looking in my direction for the first time all day as he held a big chunk of raw animal flesh in his hands

and tore at it with his teeth, chewed away hungrily while drops of blood trickled down his arms and his beard.

Oh, it was horrible! A spectacle that was almost too much to bear, though still I knew that I had to say something, do something. Knew that I had to approach him and try to find out what was wrong since no one else in that camp was willing to do so, not even the foreman. All of them having closed themselves up inside their trailers as though they hoped to avoid him, hoped that Tom would simply disappear so that they wouldn't have to deal with him again.

So steeling my nerves, I walked over and opened the door to my trailer and motioned for him to come inside. Waved my hand gently, though it was only to see him back off half a step in response, unwilling or afraid to enter that enclosed little world. That place which over the last few days must have come to seem so alien to him, like a place of fear and danger and confinement. His aversion so evident that finally I knew it was up to me to make the first approach, to step outside and follow him as he led the way toward a small clearing just outside camp where the two of us sat down beside each other. Side by side since I hardly dared to face him directly, preferring instead to sit where I could look off into the forest.

And it wasn't until after he had finished that disgusting meal of his and wiped his bloody hands on his shirt and let out a burp that I ever screwed up the courage to try speaking. To say haltingly, awkwardly, "So how's it goin', man?" The only words that came to mind, the only way I could think to begin a conversation with someone who had gone as completely insane as Tom apparently had. And then still gazing at the forest as I awaited his reply, I could see out the corner of my eye that he turned to look at me, smiled in some strange way with the blood still wet on his lips and beard. A sight so horrific, so repulsive even from my peripheral view, that it was impossible for me to turn and meet that gaze head-on. Impossible to confront the crazed look which I felt sure to find in his eyes, even though I knew that sooner or later I must. I must!

I absolutely must! I swore to myself as I screwed up my courage and began to work my way over toward his face gradually, looking everywhere else that I could think of first: the shoes and the bloody clothes and the matted hair. My eyes darting here and there until finally I felt brave enough to take the plunge, to dive into that hellish void. To peer straight into those windows to his coal-black soul.

As I dared to look into those eyes at last, however, it was only to find that they revealed nothing of what I had been expecting to see. No world of evil and insanity, but instead what I saw there was a look of calm and contentment. A look that was even more shocking in its own way than what I had been anticipating. Shocking for its very normality. Because rather than the look of a lunatic, what I saw at that moment was the look of Tom. The same look he had given me back on his first day in camp, though even more so now. Happier and more sane and more himself.

"Ya doin' okay, huh?" I said after a long pause, the only question that seemed to make any sense right then.

And a question that Tom answered with a grunt and a nod, perhaps having lost the capacity for human speech, though at least it was clear that he still understood it. Clear that he knew what I was saying.

“So ya like it out there?” I asked him next, waving my hand toward the forest that surrounded us.

And then watching for a reply, I saw a light come on in those eyes of his such as I’d never seen anywhere before. A light such as I’ve never seen again. Because it was so bright, so intense. Like the light of ultimate liberation, perhaps. The sort of light that can only come to one who has seen the darkness and been through it, been to the lowest depths of the human soul and then come out the other side, with the darkness an ally now as he enters into a new world of peace and harmony. A world of freedom such as few people have ever found.

So I knew that there was nothing more for me to say that evening. Nothing to do but to sit with my friend in silence, sharing those moments which could well prove to be our last together. Watching and listening as darkness began to gather at the end of the long summer day. Watching as the night, his good friend the night, made its slow but steady appearance. And it wasn’t very long after the darkness had become complete that Tom got up all at once and began to walk off without a word, without a gesture. Off into what had become his beloved home. His only goodbye the moment when he turned back to flash a thumbs-up before continuing on his way. Entering that great nocturnal forest never to be seen again.

Or at least he was never to be seen by me or the others in that camp. Though from what I hear, there have been reports over the years since then by hunters and hikers who claim to have seen some strange creature living in that area. A man perhaps, though the stories vary. A creature of some sort, covered in fur or covered in animal skins or naked in the summer and always running off to hide the moment it was spotted. They all seem to agree on that particular point, that the creature made it clear by its comportment that the only thing it wanted was to be left alone. Allowed to live its life where and how it chose. Free of the manmade world. Free of all human encumbrances. Free!

A FAVOR OR TWO

As GB set out on his rounds the next Saturday morning, he felt indecisive for the first time in ages. In years or at least months. He felt hesitant and uncertain, unsure what to do about the Uptown which he always stopped by to visit. Because he was afraid of what he might encounter that day after the events of the week before, afraid of the looks and the whispered comments that were sure to greet him. But then at the same time he was even more afraid of what would happen if he failed to make his appearance, all the stories and rumors that would be spread as people told each other that he had been run out of there—out of that place which he himself owned—by some small-time jerk.

So he knew that he had to go there sooner or later and show everyone that he was still the biggest man in town. But while his mind may have been telling him that the best thing to do was to go now and get it over with, there was something in his guts that kept saying, Later, there’s no

hurry, you have all day. Kept telling him that he should check out some other place first and then another and another.

And so his morning stroll took him almost everywhere that day, up one block and down another, past every building he owned in that little downtown core. Past buildings he didn't even own yet, buildings he might never own. And as he went along, he stopped to chat with everyone he met, seized whatever excuse he could think of to put off his moment of truth and put it off again. Talking with people he really didn't like, people he normally would have avoided, though people whose company he preferred right then to that other option. Those looks, those whispers. And all the while he kept hoping that sooner or later something would happen, something would break his way at last. Something...

When suddenly it did. Suddenly he turned a corner to catch sight of that big guy, Gary, walking down the street some distance off, coming from the direction of the town's only hotel and heading in the direction of the Uptown. Following a path that wasn't going to bring the two of them into contact, GB noticed in a flash, though he soon set out to remedy the situation by changing directions himself and cutting over that way. Doing so in a supposedly innocent manner, pretending not to have seen the guy, so that their meeting that day would appear accidental.

"Oh, hello there," GB said with feigned surprise as the two of them came together.

"Mornin', Mr. Nichols," Gary replied with no hint of enthusiasm in his voice.

"GB. Call me GB," he came back quickly. "So how's the, uh...?" he began again when the man's only response was a silent nod of assent. Because he hadn't gone to all the trouble of setting up this meeting just to let it end in a simple hello as they passed on the street. "How do you like the job?"

"Oh, it's good. I like it. And ya sure weren't kiddin' about it bein' hard work," Gary added in that simple, guileless tone of his.

"No, I wasn't."

"Get ya in shape, though. That's sure as hell."

GB felt a bit uncomfortable with the cursing, though in every other way he was glad to be in the big man's presence right then. And he felt a strange sense of warmth starting to grow within him just from being near the guy, a sense of... something. "So how's the, uh...?" He was about to ask how the food was when he remembered that everyone in camp had to provide their own. "How's the trailer?"

"Oh, it's okay. Real cozy," the guy said mildly in what may have been an attempt to put a polite spin on the fact that it was old and small and cramped. Something GB had picked up secondhand for next to nothing. "Hey, I'm just on my way to that café to get me some breakfast," Gary changed the subject all at once. "So if ya wanta come along, it's on me, okay. I'll spring for it," he added in a flat tone, almost as though he said it from pure force of habit.

“Yes, I’ll uh...” GB was so surprised by what he had just heard that he wasn’t quite sure how to respond. He didn’t know how to say a gracious yes and thank you to an offer that seemed to solve his problem with the Uptown so suddenly and so completely. Putting an end to his procrastination as it set him on the path toward a triumphal return. One in which he would soon be walking through the door with the big guy there to back him up, that living symbol of his “victory” of the week before and a man who nobody had better mess with if they knew what was good for them. So GB couldn’t have been more pleased with the offer, though still there was something about it that bothered him down inside. There was the question of ulterior motives. Because why would an employee of his be doing something like that? he wondered. Why would he be kissing his boss’s... behind in that way? What did he hope to gain?

And so as GB repeated his, “Yes,” a moment later, he did so without a thank you. Nothing but that single word before the two of them started on their way. Marching down the street side-by-side, with GB having to push himself in order to keep up, having to force his fat legs forward to keep pace with the long, easy strides of the bigger man. Though despite the unaccustomed effort he was putting out, still he felt the oddest sense of exhilaration as he went along. A sense of... Of safety perhaps it was, of being protected by the mere presence of the man beside him. That man who somehow made him feel even more secure than did the gun which he carried under his arm. Carried it at all times now, ever since the events of the week before. Because knowing that he had someone like that by his side was such a... It was like... Why, it was almost like he felt complete in the weirdest sort of way, complete for the first time in his life, knowing that he had someone there to provide the one big attribute which he had always been lacking: physical size and strength. That attribute which... Oh, if only Al had been willing to take orders in the same way that this Gary character appeared to be, the two of them could have taken over that town years ago. The Nichols brothers. GB providing the brains and the will-power while Al provided the brawn. They could have been unstoppable, the two of them together. They could have cleaned that place up and kept it clean, kept out all the drugs and the bums who refused to work. They could have done so much around there, so very much. If only Al had been willing to listen and take orders.

If only he hadn’t gone bad himself, turned into one of “them.”

When GB and his friend-and-protector entered the café at the end of their walk, there wasn’t a single smirk to be seen, nothing but polite nods and waves. Acknowledgements of the fact that the king was back. And he wasn’t alone either, so you had better watch your step. Because he had an army with him now, a one-man army, and he was feeling about as ornery as they come, ready to pounce on the first guy who got out of line. Especially ready to pounce on that bum Ray had he dared to show his face around there.

“Hi there, welcome back,” said Cindy to the big guy as she came over to where the two of them had taken seats at the counter. And she said it only to him, ignoring the brains of the outfit while giving the other guy a smile such as GB had never seen on her face before. A smile such as Ray probably hadn’t seen either. And a smile at sight of which a dull sense of resentment began to stir in his breast. Jealousy at a guy who after only a week in town had already elicited the sort of reaction from Cindy that GB had longed for during all the years he had known her. Because here was this new guy coming in and taking over, stealing her attention and her... Or wait a minute. Was it her attention that GB wanted right then, or was it his? Was it Gary’s? Was

he jealous of him, or was he actually jealous of her for stealing the attention of that big, handsome...? No! Forget about it! That's impossible!! It couldn't be. Not with GB, because he wasn't... you know, one of those... you know.

Once Cindy had gone off to serve other customers, the two men sat at the counter together, sipping their coffee while Gary waited for the meal he had ordered. They sat in silence much of the time, the big man so soft-spoken and showing so little interest in the subjects GB brought up that his attempts to get a conversation going fell flat one after another. Because the guy seemed to have no opinions about anything political—anything to do with the conservative issues that GB wanted to discuss—and when he tried to get more personal and asked the guy about his experiences in Vietnam, the only response was a blank stare. And so it wasn't until he finally lowered his sights and got around to something simple and local, asking the guy about his plans for the day, that he ever got a noticeable reaction.

“Well, I'd like to find a good bookstore if ya know where there is one,” Gary answered with the first hint of interest in his voice that GB had heard that day.

“Bookstore? We've got a Christian bookstore...”

“I already saw that one,” the big guy cut him off with uncharacteristic rudeness. “What I mean is a real bookstore. One where they sell all kinds—a different books, not just Christian stuff.”

“Oh, a bookstore...” GB had to stop and think about that one for a minute since he never went to bookstores himself and couldn't think of anyone else he knew around there who did. Anyone but Al and a few of his friends. Because as for himself, he got all the books he needed by mail, through adds in the Wall Street Journal or through conservative book clubs, so that he really wasn't sure what stores there could be nearby. “You've probably gotta try _____,” he named a big city that lay several hours away.

“Really? That far? Geez, that's tough cause I don't got a car.”

“No? Well, they've got a bus that you could...” He could spend all day getting there and back, GB's words faded as the thought struck him. But then just as that tiny spark of conversation threatened to die out altogether, suddenly he remembered another place that was much closer by, a former mining town that lay a short distance away along the main road where it passed through the mountains. It was a place in which GB owned a few pieces of property since he saw the potential for growth there now that certain business interests were moving in and starting to develop it into a ski resort, though it was a town that he generally tried to avoid, repulsed by the sorts of people it had attracted so far. Ski bums most of them, not the big money types that they hoped to draw in the future.

There was a bookstore in that town, though. He remembered having seen it during one of his infrequent visits. The very type of place that his big companion was looking for, he thought as he launched into a description of the town and its location, telling what he knew about it while Gary listened with interest and even asked a couple of questions. Acted in the way that a friend is supposed to act, thought GB as he felt that warm sensation within him return and grow stronger, fanned by the attention being lavished upon him, evidently. And he liked what he felt at that

moment. Liked it so much that soon he was doing his best to nurture it and draw it out, repeating what little he knew about the town and the bookstore and repeating it again with only slight variations. Going on and on about it even as signs began to appear that his audience was losing interest, the big guy's eyes glazing over, wandering toward his coffee cup. On until finally when GB paused for a moment to catch his breath, the conversation seemed to die in an instant, to fade right back into that silence which he found so uncomfortable. So disappointing anyway, so discouraging, though it was hardly what you would call an uncomfortable silence in the conventional sense of the term since his big counter-mate seemed so much at ease with it. As happy and contented when speechless as he was when speaking or listening, so that it was only GB who was left to feel the need for more words.

And it wasn't until Gary had finished his meal and started in on a final cup of coffee that the big man ever broke the silence on his own, speaking up without the least prompting. "Say, I was wonderin' about that fee you're chargin' me for gettin' this job," he asked mildly though bluntly all at once.

The question coming so out-of-the-blue as to catch GB off-guard. "The fee? The...?"

"Yeah, cause it sounds kinda bogus to me. Sounds like you're chargin' me for you talkin' to yourself about hirin' me."

What!? GB didn't like what he heard. He didn't like it one bit, though given the quiet, inoffensive tone in which the guy had spoken, it was hard to know how to react. Because the words in themselves sounded like those of an agitator, someone who deserved to be fired the moment his back was turned, but at the same time they had been said by a man he liked in some strange way. One he was hoping to use for his own purposes, in any case, all those plans which had been percolating somewhere in the back of his mind ever since the day he met the guy. So that now rather than reacting as he normally would have done, clamming up and dodging the question and then sending out word later on to fire the guy, he soon decided that in this case it might be worth the effort to give an answer.

"Oh, it's not me that charges the fee, it's the agency. It's the manpower agency," he started in on the old explanation—the old excuse—which he had put together years before, back when he was first setting up the scheme. An explanation which, by design, failed to make any mention of the fact that he was the sole owner of the agency. "Because it's the agency that does the actual hiring. It's not me or the logging company. It's the agency. And in fact, that's who you're actually working for. You're not working for me."

He paused for a moment to allow the other to respond, though when Gary's only reply was a skeptical stare, GB moved right on to the next phase. "You see, it all has to do with liability. That's what's behind the whole setup. And in fact, liability is behind an awful lot of business practices these days. Believe me when I tell you that. Because as a businessman, I have to deal with it all the time. I have to think about liability constantly just like any other smart businessman does."

"Yeah...?" Gary said something at last, though the word came out barely above a whisper.

“Yes, because I have to protect my assets. You can understand that, can’t you? I can’t leave my entire business exposed to any little thing that might happen. I have to protect it.” GB was starting to gather steam as he launched into the heart of his spiel. Presenting his case very clearly, he thought, as he gave out a version of the facts that justified everything he was doing while skipping over or brushing past anything that he found inconvenient. Making no mention of the fact that the main liability from which he was protecting himself was that which came from the very workers who were being charged the fee, for instance. Protecting his logging company in case one of them were to get injured or to sue him for some other reason since by claiming that they actually worked for the manpower agency, a shell-company with no assets to lose, he was able to leave the other company free of liability. Able to make a nice little profit in the process as well, charging those workers a fee for the service. A fee for signing away their rights, cutting their own throats as certain people might say. Though who cared about that when there was no union around there to complain or to stick up for them. Thank God and Adam Smith.

He never mentioned any of those facts, not even to himself, but instead he defended the agency and his other business practices with all the eloquence of which he was capable. And in the process, he managed to convince himself so thoroughly that he took no notice of the distracted look which had appeared on the other man’s face. Completely oblivious to his companion’s fast-waning interest until finally he came to the end of his present line of thought and paused for a reply.

Because it was only then that the reality of the situation struck him. When he looked straight at Gary and waited as the guy sat mute, staring at his coffee cup for a long moment before finally mumbling out a single word, “Whatever.” Spoken with an air of such resignation, such surrender almost, as though to declare that what he really meant to say was, “That’s it. End of discussion.” End of meal as well, and maybe even end of friendship, if you could call it that. End of whatever there was between the two of them and goodbye forever.

As little as GB understood about human emotion and interaction, the meaning of that word had been much too clear for even him to miss, while the quiet manner in which it had been spoken served to increase its impact in a way that shouting never could have done. To make the blow so potent, so powerful as to stun him into silence, the next argument which he had been preparing to present seeming to evaporate from his mind. I’ve lost him! he said to himself as the significance of the big guy’s statement began to sink in. All those plans I had, all the things we could have pulled off together.

Those plans which had been in the back of his mind ever since his return to that town a few years before, the great things he could accomplish someday if only he could get enough muscle behind him. If he could recruit someone like this Gary character, big and strong and intimidating and maybe a bit on the stupid side, a guy who seemed so perfect for the job that his mere presence in town had sent GB’s plans into overdrive during the week since they first met. Because just think about what he could do if he had someone like that on his side, all the deals he could pull off, all the pressure he could apply. And think about how much easier it would be to deal with those cowboys around there if he had a man like that along for protection and enforcement. All those jerks who understood nothing but threats and violence and physical force, laughing in his face when he threatened to sue them and telling him, “You just try to collect it.” Because with Gary there to do the collecting for him, just imagine how they would react.

Imagine how fast they would pay up. They wouldn't dare to argue with someone as big and tough as him. No, it would be nothing but, "Yes sir, whatever you want sir, you just take it." Oh, it could be so wonderful, the realization of so many of his dreams, and all he needed was Gary's help. Gary who had just said goodbye!

"I tell you what, I think I can find a way to waive that fee for you if you want. I think there's a way to get around it, though it's not, uh... It can't be completely free, you understand, so you'll have to do something for me in exchange." The business negotiator in GB was snapping into gear even as he made his desperation move, even as he began to plead with the guy not to go.

"Do somethin'...?"

"Yes, a favor or two. That's all I ask, is for you to do a few favors for me."

"Whattaya mean favors? Whattaya talkin' about?" Gary sounded suspicious though mildly interested at the same time. The first interest he had shown in some time.

"Just a few little jobs that I need to have done but can't do by myself, that's all. Jobs where I need a little help."

"Yeah? What type-a jobs ya mean?"

"Oh, they're just little... They're like pick-up and delivery jobs mostly." GB didn't want to reveal too much about what was involved. Not yet. Not until he heard something that sounded more like a yes.

"Are they legal?" It was clear that the big guy still had his suspicions.

"Yes, of course they're legal!" GB shot back with conviction, relieved at the same time that he hadn't been asked about their morality. That business-morality which is so much in the eye of the beholder.

"And are they moral?" Gary said almost as though he had just been reading GB's thoughts.

"Yes, of course they're moral," GB replied as forcefully as he could. Of course they were moral according to his own definition of the word, a definition which says that winning is what it's all about.

It took several more assurances on GB's part before Gary finally offered something resembling a tacit agreement, saying that it sounded okay to him, though he still wanted a few more details before he could say anything definite. He wanted to know what exactly he would be dropping off and picking up, and what else he would be expected to do. And he said it in a way that implied an ongoing lack of trust in the words he was hearing, or perhaps it was more a lack of trust in the person from whom he was hearing them.

GB didn't let the tone bother him, though, as he went on with his effort to close the sale, rationing out information in what he thought would be the most effective and convincing way possible. Telling the guy that it wasn't so much a matter of making any pick-ups himself as it was of helping his boss to make them, after which he began to describe some of the threats he had received from the people involved. He gave none of the details of the business deals which had led to all those threats, however, as instead he portrayed himself as the poor, innocent victim. The little guy who those people thought they could push around, so that what he needed was protection. What he needed a bodyguard, though a non-violent one, strictly non-violent, he quickly assured his audience in what he hoped was a convincing tone. He didn't need a bodyguard who would attack anyone or get into fights. No, all he needed was someone who could get him out of there safely in case one of the other guys were to turn violent.

And GB was outdoing himself with his sales pitch that day, he knew that he was. His speech so eloquent, so convincing, that it came as no surprise when Gary finally gave in completely. When he said, "Okay, it's a deal." Agreed to do the favors though with the exact number being left undefined, just as GB wanted. Available for use as leverage later on. He agreed to become not only GB's employee but also his tool, the hammer to be used whenever a hammer was called for, whenever threats and intimidation were required in order to get his way. Because despite all the assurances that he had just given, his real plan was to go directly onto the offensive and to take by force—or rather by threat of force—all those things which had been denied him so far. The businessmen who refused to sell out, along with anyone else who defied him in any way. Because with the big guy there to help him throw his weight around, soon he would have it all. He would own everything, absolutely everything. The entire town.

Not that he wanted it only for himself, you understand. No, his vision was actually much bigger than that, don't get him wrong. It was a vision in which he would take over that town and clean it up for its own sake. For the sake of the nation, in fact, as he would turn that place into a model for the whole country to follow. He would get rid of the drugs and put all those unemployed bums to work, turn them into the type of clean-living, hard-working people who used to live around there back in the good old days. Because he was going to make that town into the sort of paradise that America once used to be, while in the process making himself into a national hero, of course. The man who cleaned up Dodge City. His picture on the cover of magazines. Visits to Washington to confer with the President. Ronald Reagan, America's greatest President ever...

As they got up to leave, GB was feeling so good about all the big things that lay ahead that it didn't bother him a bit when Cindy came out and flirted openly with the big man as he stopped at the cash register to pay the bill. When she swept a wisp of blonde hair away from her face and then fixed him with her beautiful blue eyes and said, "So ya gonna be around town for awhile?"

"Yeah, I guess I am," Gary said as a coy smile came over her face in reply.

No, that didn't bother GB. None of it did. And he felt no jealousy toward the guy whatsoever. Because if anything, what he felt right then was a sense of conquest, of vicarious conquest in this case perhaps. A sense that now he had won Cindy over at last even if he had done so in an indirect sort of way.

Before parting, GB made sure to set up Gary's first "favor," to be performed sometime during the coming week. On Wednesday or Thursday when the guy would be allowed to take a few hours off from setting chokers—take them off with full pay, don't worry about that—as he accompanied his boss to a nearby town where he would perform some service or other. GB tried to be as vague as possible when it came to telling the big guy what would be expected of him on that day, and he said nothing at all about the background issues involved. Because the less the guy knew about it the better, the less chance there was that he would back out or otherwise disrupt what GB hoped was a flawless plan.

When the day of the favor arrived, GB quickly discovered that there was at least one big flaw in his plan, however, a flaw which showed up right at the beginning. Because the first thing he had to do that day was to drive all the way out to the logging camp to pick up Gary who didn't have a car. He had to take his own car along those little dirt roads that he always found so disorienting, had to make his way clear out to that isolated camp, and he had to do so all by himself, with no one there to give him directions. No one! he groaned as he soon came to the realization that he was lost, completely lost, having arrived at a fork in the road where he had no idea which way to go. With nothing to do but to stop there and wait for an empty logging truck to come by on its way to the camp and then try to follow it, losing track of it before long since he refused to push his brand new Cadillac at such reckless speeds on such a horrid road as that, so that by the time he came to the next fork in the road, he had to do the same thing all over again. Had to stop and wait for another truck, follow that one until he lost it as well and then stop to wait for yet another. And as he made his way slowly toward the camp, he was hating every minute of the drive, those confusing roads, so narrow and so full of twists and turns, and those loaded logging trucks that would come barreling down on him at such incredible speeds, missing his car by inches as they shot past. Missing it by fractions of inches.

It had to be one of the worst experiences of his life, and it seemed to go on and on and on, forever and ever. On until he thought he could take it no longer, on until he was about to stop and give the whole thing up, on until... Safety at last! He practically shouted it aloud as he came around a curve and caught sight of the landing. Piles of logs and big machines. All the signs of civilization after the perils he had just been through. And waves of relief came flooding through his body at the sight.

All those welcomed signs of human endeavor and human control after the horrors of the wilderness. Signs of his own control, he soon came to realize as he drew nearer. Because it was all his, everything that he saw before him. The logs and the machinery and even the men. He owned them all. And as he pulled to a stop at the edge of the landing, the sense of relief that filled his breast grew stronger and stronger. It rose and swelled and expanded, glowing more brightly all the time. His sense of power, it had soon come to be, his sense of mastery over all he surveyed. So that by the time he saw the foreman making his way over toward the car to kiss his behind, GB's emotions were absolutely soaring. The ruler of that empire which lay before him, that empire which he was building right there with his own two hands, fulfilling in that way the glorious destiny which he had always known would be his someday. Because as he looked around him now, what he saw wasn't just men and machines, what he saw was the physical manifestation of his own power. Of that mighty will of his which was transforming that godforsaken jungle into a decent place at last. And all those fresh-cut logs which lay before him? They were his trophies, the symbols of his triumph. The logs and the tree stumps in the

surrounding woods. They were the marks he was leaving upon the world, the monuments which he was erecting to himself.

The trip back out of the forest turned out to be far less threatening than what the trip in had been. And it had nothing to do with the sense of power and control which he had enjoyed during the time spent at the landing, not with the way that feeling had dissipated so quickly after the first few curves in the road. No, what he felt instead was the sense of security that he always seemed to get when in the presence of the big guy riding in the car with him. That guy who somehow made him feel even safer and better protected than did the gun which he had under his arm, the one in the glove-compartment as well, not to mention the shotgun in the trunk. And not only did Gary's presence seem to banish any sense of peril that GB might otherwise have felt, but the guy also made the trip far less confusing than what the earlier one had been, silently pointing the way whenever they came to a fork or a crossroads as though he were aware of the need for help without it being spoken.

But while GB may have been feeling much better now that the dangers seemed to be under control—all of them except the occasional wild and crazy logging truck—he was also aware of the fact that this wasn't going to be the final trip he would have to make through the forest that day. Not when he still had to drop the big guy back off at camp later on before returning to town by himself at the end. Driving back all alone once again and maybe even having to do so after dark! It was a frightening prospect that he faced. So terrifying that it was hard to focus his mind on the upcoming confrontation in the town they were heading for. Hard to think about anything but that drive as his mind struggled to come up with some solution, some way to avoid it.

Hey, I've got it! he said to himself as he suddenly remembered an old car that he had sitting around in a lot somewhere, one he had seized from a guy who owed him money. It was a car that was so old and beat up that it really wasn't worth anything, and it had been doing nothing since he got it besides gathering dust in that lot. But still it could prove to be the key to the entire problem, he realized as he began to think things over. An asset of so little value that he had nothing to lose and much to gain by offering it to Gary.

"Say, I have a car I could let you have if you want it."

"Yeah?" It was practically the first word he had heard from Gary's mouth.

"Yes, it's a little on the old side, but it still runs, and I can..." He was about to say, I can give it to you for a good price, but then he thought better of bringing up that subject so early in the negotiation.

"Yeah? Ya say it runs good?"

Good? Who said it runs good? Well? No, all I ever said is that it runs. "It's a Chevy of some type, and it's a few years old, like from the sixties or something."

"So how much d'ya want for it?" Gary cut right to the chase.

Putting a crimp into GB's negotiating style. "Oh, I don't, uh... I don't want any money for it," he began hesitantly. "I just... I'd like to trade it to you, is what. Trade it for... you know... favors. For a few more favors."

"Favors?" Gary sounded reticent, even mildly alarmed. "Man, I don't know about that, cause here I didn't even do the first one for ya yet, so I really don't know what I'm gettin' myself into."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I don't mean a lot of favors or any type of long-term commitment. I'm just talking about little things is all. A few little things that you can do for me." A few more little things than what you've already promised to do.

"I don't know, cause like... I mean, what are they exactly? And what'm I s'posed to be doin' today? Exactly."

"Today? Well uh..." GB had known all along that he would have to give the guy a lot more information than what he had done so far. He would have to set him up before they got to where they were going by telling a story that would hold up once events began to unfold, hopefully. A story whose details he had been working on for some time by then, one in which... Well, there's no time like the present, he said to himself. No time like now to begin.

Soon he was starting out with a few of the most obvious facts that the guy was sure to learn about the moment they arrived. Describing the big workshop they were on their way to visit in a certain town some distance away, one that was perfectly situated for the expansion of his logging business that he had been wanting to make. And the building itself was nearly ideal for his purposes as well, while at the same time it was much too big for its present owner so that it sat half-empty and almost completely unused most of the time. But the one big catch in his plan was the fact that for some reason or other, the guy who owned the place refused to move out and let GB take over, refused to move to the smaller shop which he had been offered rent-free, so that what the two of them were going to have to do that day was to get the guy out of there once and for all. And it was only when he came to the part about the legal and moral aspects of the move which they were about to execute by force that GB found himself being obliged to scramble a bit, obliged to add a few serious embellishments to the truth. Claiming for instance that there had long been an agreement on the sale of the building, though for some reason the guy was trying to back out of it now.

Because that part of the story wasn't strictly true. There was no written agreement between them such as he tried to imply in his account, and in fact, they had never even come to any sort of verbal agreement. Nothing but an, "I'll think about it," the first time GB approached the owner with an offer, followed later by one, "No," after another. Which meant that in addition to the task of moving the guy out of the shop that day, they also had a second, unspoken mission in which they would have to force him to sign the set of papers that GB was carrying with him.

It didn't seem like this would be the best time to mention that part of the deal, however, so he said nothing about it for the time being, put it off for some more propitious moment. And he also embellished rather freely when it came to the question of physical threats and his own need for protection, hoping that Gary wouldn't notice the fact that the guy they were going after

was so old and scrawny that he was probably one of the few people in the entire state that GB could actually beat in a fight.

“And ya say all I gotta do is keep this guy from goin’ after ya, huh?” Gary was starting to sound properly convinced at last.

“Yes, of course. That’s all.”

“Well if ya promise, then I s’pose it’s gonna be okay.”

Okay! He said it was going to be okay. He said that he accepted the deal—accepted the whole package as far as GB was concerned. Agreed to perform the task that day and then go along with the deal for the car as well. That deal which would lead to even more favors, with the exact number still left undefined. The guy had just agreed to all that and a whole lot more, whether he was aware of it or not.

Oh, this is too good to be true, GB said to himself as the negotiating session came to an end. That session which had to be one of the most successful of his entire career since he had gotten everything that he wanted from the guy and more. And he was feeling so contented with himself over the next couple of miles, so optimistic about what lay ahead and so expansive that all at once, his elation seemed to come bursting from his mouth of its own accord. “Ya know, this could go big around here, and I mean really big. This could be one of the biggest things ever, and it’s... Ya know, you can be a part of it if you want.”

Wait a minute! What’d I just say!? GB shouted silently at himself. Have I gone crazy or what? Making an offer like that...

But then as incredulous as he felt at the sound of his own words, he was even more shocked when he heard Gary’s response a moment later. The mumbled, “Yeah?” spoken with an air of indifference, an air of who-cares.

“Yes, of course you can,” GB said in disbelief, amazed that an act of such casual generosity, fleeting and insincere though it may have been, could have made so little impression upon the guy. Because this was money he was talking about here. Money! And it was completely unfathomable to him that anyone could feel such a lack of interest in wealth and power as this guy seemed to feel, such a lack of ambition.

“Aren’t you interested in success?” He couldn’t have held the question in had he tried. “Don’t you have any plans in life? Are you just gonna take whatever comes?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But plans! You’ve gotta have plans, or else how are you ever gonna get anywhere?”

“I don’t know...” Gary’s voice began low before fading completely.

“Yes, you’ve gotta have plans in life or else you’ll end up being a loser. You’ll end up... Why, you’ll end up like all those hippies!” The years of youthful frustration were starting to

come out all at once, forced to the surface by the guy's strange and incomprehensible passivity. "Because you remember them, don't you? They never had any plans in life, they were just gonna live for the moment. They were gonna do their thing. Remember that? All that stupid talk you used to hear back then. Well what do you think ever came of them? Where do you think they are today? Do you think they're rich and successful like me? No they're not! They're working for me, that's what they're doing. The ones who aren't dead or in prison. They're working for guys like me. All those people who used to be so cool and hip back then, all those people... Well they're nothing but a bunch of losers today, every single one of them. They're a bunch of nobodies, they're nothing. Because look at where they are today and then look at me. Look at where I am!"

As GB's rant went on and on, an entire lifetime of stored-up anger pouring from his mouth in a steady stream, the big guy in the car beside him sat motionless. Staring out the windshield at the road ahead with his eyes seemingly unfocused. Seeing nothing and hearing nothing, it appeared, as he failed to respond in any way to the questions that GB posed to him from time to time. He didn't speak, and he didn't react, not a sound escaping his lips, not a twitch or a blink. Frozen in place like a big block of wood.

And it wasn't until long after GB had finished his diatribe and sunk into silence himself, just as they were entering the town of their destination, that Gary finally spoke again. "Ya know, I figure it's kinda like what Chuang Tzu talks about." Who? Sean who? "The way he says that when the times are right, you accomplish all things, but when the times are wrong, it's enough if you can just preserve your life."

Now what the heck was that supposed to mean?

When they pulled to a halt in front of the big garage/workshop, there was a pickup truck waiting there for them with the two young layabouts GB had hired to do the actual moving seated in the cab. Those two high school dropouts, always short on cash and looking for a chance to make a few bucks as long as it didn't involve too much work, sitting there ready to go. Ready to use that truck of theirs to haul everything they could find inside the shop over to the new location and ready to be paid very generously for their efforts. Much too generously in GB's opinion, though since they were the type of guys who weren't likely to ask questions, their services were probably worth the price on this occasion.

As GB got out of his car and walked over to the shop, however, it was only to find that the doors were locked, the big garage doors and the little side door as well, so that apparently the trip that day had been made in vain. And it wasn't until after one of the layabouts came walking over to join him that ever the truth was revealed. "We seen him come over and lock the door when we pulled up."

Aha! So the guy was inside after all, and the plan was still a go. And the only thing they had to do was to make him open up. They had to pound on the doors until he answered, banging and rattling away and calling his name as loudly as they could. Though despite all the noise that the group of them made, they heard not a peep in response, and they saw no sign of him when they peered through the windows. Nothing. Like the guy must have been hiding out somewhere inside, waiting for them to go away—or waiting for them to force their way in.

“Okay, go ahead and break it open,” GB said to the big guy as he stepped back all at once and pointed at the side door. “Go ahead.”

Gary just stood there looking at him, though. “Hey, that’s not what ya…”

“It’s okay. Cause remember, I own this place now, so there’s nothing wrong with it. I’m just telling you to break into my own place, that’s all.”

But still Gary hesitated despite the reassurance. Still he held back, glancing at the door and then at his boss with a quizzical expression on his face. Not arguing but not obeying the order either, even as it was repeated and repeated again. Looking on so passively that finally GB went over and started banging on the door with his own shoulder, ramming into it lightly a few times as he pretended to try breaking it down himself. Hitting it three times, four...

“Okay, get outa the way,” Gary spoke again at last as he took over from the smaller man and made short work of the job, sent the door flying with a single lunge.

But then as the group of them entered the shop through the broken door, still there was no one in sight and no answer when GB called out the owner’s name. Not a sound to be heard anywhere besides the clatter of the two layabouts as they opened the big doors and backed their pickup truck inside and started in on their work. Started loading whatever they could find into the back of the truck, tools and materials and scraps, with no big pieces of machinery to be seen anywhere in that drafty, nearly-vacant building. Only enough smaller stuff inside it for three or four trips.

Oh, this is too easy, GB said to himself. Too easy though also too hard since he still needed that signature. He had to find that stubborn little twerp and force him to sign those papers if he wanted to make everything that he was doing legal. Make it into something other than a felony breaking-and-entering. But with the guy hiding out in the way that he was...

The office in back! That was where he had to be, that was the only hiding place in there. And so it was with that thought in mind, a, “Come on,” to his big companion, that GB was soon on his way there. Walking to the office and turning the knob and then throwing the door open to find Charlie, the owner, cowering in a corner with a crowbar in his hands and a look of fear on his face. So helpless, so defenseless that GB wanted to go over and throttle the guy all by himself, before Gary even had time to... No, wait a minute! He couldn’t let Gary walk in there and see the guy looking the way he did right then, not when it would ruin the entire cover story he had concocted. So he had to do something, and he had to do it now.

“Help!” he yelled as he heard the big guy’s footsteps arrive at the doorway. “Help, he’s got a weapon!”

And with that Gary came bounding inside, right past his boss. Fast and agile for a man so big as he seized the offender and disarmed him and threw him to the ground in one quick move. Left the poor little guy stretched out on his back with a dazed look on his face, the look of one so stunned by the sudden violence that he had no idea what had just hit him, completely helpless as the big guy frisked him for weapons before stepping back. And it wasn’t until after several moments had passed, as he was ordered by the smaller and chubbier of his adversaries to get to

his feet, that old Charlie finally began to move. Struggled to comply as he rolled onto his side and tried to raise himself. Still so weak and shaky, though, that it was only with a helping hand from Gary that he ever managed to make it all the way up. Managed to stand at last, swaying as though he might fall back down at any moment.

What to do now? GB asked himself. He had to get this thing over with before the old guy had time to recover his wits and start talking, or before the big guy did something to mess it all up. Because to look at him, Gary was about as intimidating as they come, appearing even more formidable than usual on that day with his dusty workclothes and boots. Though when it came to the way he had been acting, GB was starting to have his doubts. Like take the hesitation he had shown when told to break down the door. And then what about the expression on his face at that moment? The look of concern as he watched Charlie so unsteady on his feet. A look as though he were more likely to go over and give the guy a glass of water than to twist his arm and force him to sign anything.

So GB knew that he had to think fast once again and bluff his way through this thing while the momentum was still on his side. He had to leverage the situation, as the saying goes, had to turn things around in such a way as to put himself in the right and Charlie in the wrong. He had to... Hey that's right. He had to hand over the check that he was carrying with him. Give it to Charlie and make him into the bad guy, the one who refused to sign the papers even after he had been paid. The guy who refused to honor his part of the bargain.

As GB pulled out the check, he was about to set it down on the desk. But then thinking better of it, he walked up to Charlie and slid it into the breast pocket of his ragged coveralls, the old guy still in too much of a daze to offer any sort of resistance. Unable to prevent the check from entering his pocket and unable to fight back as he was dragged a couple of steps over to the desk where the deed and other papers were soon spread out before him.

"Okay now, start signing!" GB barked with authority. Reached out a moment later when he saw Charlie hesitate, grabbing the guy's right hand and putting a pen in it before placing it in position for the first signature. "You'd better start signing, and you'd better start now," he said while motioning toward the big guy with his eyes. "Or else!"

Gary was back to that strong-and-silent act of his as the two of them started their journey home, sitting with a serious expression on his face that was completely at odds with the way GB felt at that moment. The elation he felt at having pulled off one of the biggest coups of his career, having gained a foothold in a whole new town and perhaps even a stranglehold on the logging industry in the entire region. And he was so pleased with himself over what he had just accomplished that he couldn't stop smiling as he drove along, nodding his head slightly from time to time and muttering a quiet, "Yeah, I did it. I pulled it off."

He felt so pumped up over the victory he had won that day that he wanted to stop and celebrate, wanted to pull into some roadside bar and have a drink and listen to music, maybe even honky tonk music, as revved up and ready to howl as he was right then. Though as he glanced over at the big lump seated beside him, he wasn't sure what to say or do. He was almost afraid to start a conversation with the guy since he didn't know how any words of his might be received. Didn't know what the guy was likely to say in return, as unpredictable as some of his

earlier statements and reactions had been. At the same time, though, he knew that he had to speak up and lighten the mood a bit, had to reassure himself as well that Gary would still be on his side in the future. Still back him up when the time came for his next big move.

“Well, it looks like you won’t have to go back to work today,” GB began. Went on a moment later when there was no reaction on the part of his passenger, “I mean, by the time we get to town and get you that car of yours and do the paperwork, and by the time you drive it clear out to the camp...”

“I think we better forget about that stuff, Mr. Nichols,” Gary cut in all at once in a quiet though decisive tone.

“We’d better what?” GB found himself off-balance. As usual, it seemed.

“We better forget about the car, and we can forget about that fee stuff, too, cause I’ll just go ahead and pay it.”

“But you can’t do that. We had a deal. You can’t just...”

“We kinda had a deal, but you’re not bein’ straight with me, all that stuff ya been sayin’. Ya been feedin’ me a line, so the deal’s off.” Gary’s voice was firmer and more insistent than GB had heard it before.

“But you can’t do that. You can’t just call it off.” GB didn’t like being put on the defensive, though for the time being he could see no alternative. Nothing to do but whine.

“I can if you’re not tellin’ me the truth about the stuff ya want me to do for ya. Cause like, what was that really all about back there? What’d we just go and pull off?”

“Pull off? We didn’t pull anything off, we just... It was exactly what I told you it was.”

“Oh come on, Mr. Nichols. I’m not that stupid.” Gary said it as though he had swallowed the word bullshit at the beginning of his response. “I know ya never had any deal with that guy. Cause otherwise, what were all them papers ya made him sign?”

“The papers...? Oh, they were just...” GB had to remember his cover story and remember it fast. “They were the final papers was all, the ones he had to sign at closing. They were...” As he glanced over and saw the skeptical look on the big man’s face, he knew that the line wasn’t going over at all, so that perhaps it would be better to back off and try altering his position slightly. “I mean, the agreement was mainly verbal up to that point, you understand. We didn’t have very much on paper, so we had to... You know, there was a lot that still had to be written out and signed when we finalized.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, of course. Because I haven’t been lying to you. I’ve been telling you the truth all along, and it was just that... Well, he was trying to back out of our agreement like I told you he was. Exactly like I told you he was.” GB hoped that his words sounded sincere.

“And so that’s why ya had me beat him up for ya?”

“I never told you to hit him that way. That wasn’t me.” GB had been looking for an opening, some way to turn the tables and put the other guy onto the defensive. So that now upon hearing that tone... “You were just there to protect me. Don’t you remember? You weren’t supposed to body-slam poor old Charlie the way you did. You were just... That was something you did on your own.”

“Was it?” Gary’s voice sounded weak and broken all at once, practically cracking as he spoke.

Good! said GB to himself when he heard it. That means I’ve got him. “Yes, you weren’t supposed to hurt him that way, that was never part of our deal. Never. You were just supposed to back me up. Remember? You were supposed to protect me, but without hurting anyone. So it’s you who’s not being straight with me. It’s you!”

As GB paused momentarily, he glanced over once again to see Gary staring out the windshield, the assertive expression of a moment before having vanished from his face, replaced instead by a gloomy and meditative look. One that seemed to say, He’s yours now, he’s all yours, you have him right where you want him, so keep on pressing. “Yes, it was you who attacked him, and if you try to use that as an excuse for backing out of our deal now, well the only thing I can tell you is that you’ll have to walk back to that camp of yours. Because I won’t drive you there. I won’t do it. Not under these circumstances.”

Gary said nothing in response as GB began to expand upon that line of reasoning over the next minute or two. Portraying himself as the innocent victim of betrayal, the man who had made a deal in good faith only to have the other guy try to renege on it, try to pull out at the last minute and leave him hanging.

And his strategy seemed to be working as Gary sat in silence, a look on his face as though he were weakening fast, on the verge of giving in at any moment. Until suddenly he turned and came out with one last surprise. A question that GB had been hoping not to hear. “Okay, you got it. You win,” he said in a soft, grave voice. “But just tell me one thing. What exactly are ya talkin’ about here? How many favors do ya want me to do?”

“A few. I already told you that.”

“But what’s a few? Like how many exactly? Like a number.”

“A number? Oh uh... It’s uh...” GB wasn’t sure what to say or how to say it. “It’s gotta be something like... Oh, I don’t know. I was thinking something like ten...”

“Ten!?” Gary burst out as though in disbelief.

With such shock in his voice that GB didn’t dare to finish his sentence. Didn’t dare to add the word each: ten for the fee and ten for the car. “Because remember, this isn’t costing you a thing. You’re still getting paid even when you take the whole day off, so it’s really not that big a favor.”

It took several minutes of haggling before the two of them finally managed to settle upon a number. Several minutes of GB giving way gradually while Gary did the same though with even greater reluctance, it appeared, grudgingly going from three to four until finally they settled upon five—five more favors, not counting the one which had already been performed. And on top of that, GB had to promise that they would all be “clean” favors, as Gary called them. Favors that involved no legal grey areas.

As they reached their accord at last, GB felt as though he had been cheated in a way, felt that the number was much too small for all the plans he had in mind. But then when he heard what Gary had to say at the end, both the words and the way in which they were spoken, it sounded like the guy must have seen his own acceptance of the deal in an even darker light. Seen it as a form of defeat, perhaps outright surrender as he came out in a tone of quiet resignation. “Okay, you win,” he muttered. “You always win cause it’s your world now. You own it all. You own the whole fuckin’ world.”

FIVE MORE

Five didn’t seem like very many favors to work with, and it threw a real hitch into GB’s plans for the final takeover of that town. Because he had been counting on having at least ten or twenty favors to work with, and maybe a whole lot more if he could just find something else to offer in exchange, perhaps even hiring the big guy as a full-time bodyguard with no other duties beyond those favors. Nothing beyond backing him up and protecting him as he took on one local troublemaker after another, one holdout who refused to sell or one deadbeat who refused to pay his bills. And that’s not to mention all the vanity-type jobs that the guy could have done, going along to help make him look and feel even more important than what he already did when he went to perform those civic duties which come from being the town’s richest man. The thank you ceremonies for his charitable donations, for instance, those golden opportunities for GB to get up and lecture the recipients of his generosity. To share with them some of the wisdom that only the rich have to offer.

Oh, it would have been so beautiful to attend one of those things while being escorted by a big, impressive-looking bodyguard like Gary. Tall and strong and there to follow his every command. It would have been a dream come true, if only there were some way to convince the guy to go along with it. And if only he could make a few small changes as well: a haircut and nicer clothes and a more obedient attitude. No more hesitation, just, “Yes sir, whatever you want sir.” That would have been fantastic.

With only five favors at his disposal, however, GB knew that he would have to husband them carefully, that he couldn’t afford to waste a single one. Like for instance, when he heard one day about a troublemaker at one of his logging camps who had been talking about unions, he knew that he couldn’t use up one of his favors by firing the guy in the way that he would have liked to. Couldn’t call that jerk into his office or go out to confront him at the camp where he worked, getting right up into his face and then telling him, “You’re fired, you commie!” Standing up to that radical in the way that he had so often dreamed of doing back in college, the big guy there to back him up. No, he couldn’t do it that way with only five favors coming to him,

so instead he had to do it in his usual way. Had to send a note to the foreman telling him to fire the guy.

Because those five favors had to be saved for more important things. Saved for the hard-cases, those situations in which the police were of no help since they involved civil rather than criminal issues, though civil issues in which the levels of threat and danger were so high that no one in town could be hired to do the jobs for him, no one willing to take on such risks. Which meant that if he didn't go out and do them himself, then his only alternative would be to let the whole thing drop. To let those people get away with defying him and his authority.

And it was precisely a situation of that sort that he decided to take on with the first of Gary's favors, calling upon his services a week or so after the day of the original test-favor. It was a case in which there was no question about GB's legal right to handle things in the way that he was, the law and even morality being completely on his side, while the only thing that made it a problem was the fact that the other man involved had such a bad reputation around town that everyone was afraid of him. No one was brave enough to go out to his ranch and repossess the tractor and other equipment which he had stopped making payments on some time back. Not without protection, they weren't. Not without someone there to stand between them and that man who had advertised his defiance so freely, told GB on several occasions that he could come and get the stuff any time he wanted, though he had better be ready for a fight when he came.

And the rancher seemed as good as his word when the day of the favor arrived, stepping out to challenge them from the moment they drove onto his property, GB and his bodyguard along with a truck being driven by the man hired to haul the equipment off. He stood there blocking their way with his hands clenched in fists and his arms at the ready, the very picture of defiance as he yelled out threats. But then no sooner had Gary emerged from the car and started in his direction than suddenly the guy began to backpedal, clearly intimidated by the size and the no-nonsense bearing of the man who approached him. He backed off several steps before turning to flee in full retreat, running all the way to his house where he finally halted in the doorway to make a stand of sorts. To yell his defiance and his insults from that spot where he could easily escape inside should Gary decide to continue his advance. Screaming and throwing out every curse imaginable over the course of the next few minutes, though he made no move to carry out any of those threats as the big man stood watching from a short distance away, all the rancher's bravado coming out of his mouth as pure hot air.

And Gary's presence proved to be even more decisive during the performance of his second favor which came another week after the first one. It was a situation that was similar to the other in many ways since it involved another man with a bad reputation around town, an even worse reputation than the rancher's, in fact, and deservedly so as it turned out. He was a man who owned a little fix-it shop in town that he had been running for some time, running it into the ground, evidently, since he hadn't been able to pay his rent in a long, long time. And though he had been served with an eviction notice months before, he had been ignoring it so stubbornly that he seemed to be under the impression that he would be able to stay there forever, rent free. That no one would ever be brave enough to come in and throw him out.

As the day of the favor arrived, GB hired a few layabouts to move everything out of the shop while he and the big guy would deal with the soon-to-be-former owner and his threats.

Those threats which quickly proved to be all too real. Because no sooner had Gary opened the door and begun to walk into that cluttered little shop than the man reached down to pull out a gun which he kept hidden behind the counter. He reached down though too slowly as the big guy reacted in an instant, went charging across the room, hurdling piles of junk and diving over the counter to grab the owner before he could get the thing all the way out. To tear the pistol from his hand and toss it aside and then wrap the guy up in a vice-like grip. So that by the time GB, who came right behind, had screamed, "Oh my God!" and panicked and gone for his own gun and fumbled around and nearly dropped it before finally getting it out and holding it up, he did so unopposed. Pointing it and shouting his orders at a man who was already defenseless.

With those first two favors having been such "clean" ones, so clearly within the legal and moral bounds which had been set for their deal, and with the second one having involved a man who was every bit the public danger he had been advertised to be, Gary's attitude toward his boss seemed to improve markedly in their wake. As though his suspicions were starting to dissipate at last. And he even seemed friendlier, using the name GB rather than Mr. Nichols as they parted at the end of that second day. Using it again when they met at the Uptown Café the next Saturday morning.

The next Saturday and the one after and the one after that in those days and weeks which now began to flow by with no need for more favors thanks to the scare which Gary's quick and decisive action had thrown into all the local bad actors. Because as word spread about the ease with which he had handled a man who was supposed to be one of the toughest in town, soon the deadbeats were starting to come around. They were paying off their debts or at least paying what they could afford, none of them anxious to become the next victim of GB's goon, as the big man became known. And even the holdouts who had been refusing to sell out or to make other sorts of deals with him were suddenly becoming more cooperative. So cooperative as to eliminate any immediate need for further arm-twisting.

And so during the resulting weeks of lull, the only time that GB and Gary ever saw each other was at their Saturday morning encounters. Those days on which they would sit together at the counter of the Uptown and talk. Yes, that's right. Talk. Even Gary taking part as the two of them sat there each week like a couple of old friends, discussing all the topics with which the big guy apparently felt most at ease—the weather and country music and maybe a little sports. And while he still seemed as dodgy as ever when it came to his past, answering direct questions with jokes or with vague statements about shipping something-or-other, never specifying what exactly it was that he shipped, there were times when he would suddenly bring up certain things about himself and his past without being asked. He would tell little stories about people he had known or things he had done. Though since he never provided any real background information or other perspective for his stories, their final effect would be to muddle his personal history even more than what it had already been. To clarify nothing while raising more questions than they answered.

Like for instance, there was the time when he started talking about some guy he had known in Capetown. "South Africa?" GB asked. "Yeah, South Africa," came the matter-of-fact reply, with nothing further. No explanation about how a guy like him, one who had just been riding around on freight trains a month or so before, had ever made it all the way to South Africa. And then as though that incident hadn't been strange enough, it soon proved to be far

from an isolated one, the guy coming up with further anecdotes later on which were set in equally exotic locales. Istanbul, Calcutta, and some little place with a weird-sounding name that GB had never heard before. A place which, “Oh, it’s on Borneo,” came the reply when he asked. Borneo!? What could that guy have been doing in a place like that? What could he have been shipping out of there? Shrunken heads? Drugs!?

GB never managed to clear up any of those things during their weekly encounters, being unwilling to appear stupid by asking the most basic questions while Gary would soon be moving on to other topics. The weather or country music. And in the same way, he was never quite sure how things were going with Cindy since the big guy never discussed the matter, leaving him only the outward signs from which to draw his conclusions. The way she would smile at him as he first entered, for instance, those smiles which seemed to become less effusive and more businesslike with each passing week, as though the lady were less impressed with the big man the more she got to know him. Just as GB had suspected all along that she would be.

Because just take a look at the guy, he said to himself as the changing nature of her smiles became apparent. He’s nothing like the guys she usually goes for. He doesn’t have some hot car to drive her around in, all he’s got is that old clunker I gave him, and he’s not all primped and perfumed like that Ray was. He’s just... He’s nothing like her type, and he’s nothing like the type of man that she should be going for if she had any sense either. A rich man, a powerful man, one who owns everything that there is to own around here, the whole town, the...

Enough of that!

There was another topic that Gary always seemed to dodge whenever it came up during their discussions, that being politics. Not that he would argue or disagree in any way, but instead he would fall silent and look away each time that GB tried to inject a little political commentary into the conversation. Each time he would start to sing the praises of his hero, Ronald Reagan. America’s greatest President. Ever! Or each time he would attack the evils of liberalism and radicalism and you-name-it. Anything but hippies or their ilk, being leery of that subject by then after the way the guy had reacted that day in the car. The anger, the visceral hatred he had demonstrated toward those people who spit on him when he came back from Vietnam. Burned his flag and insulted his country and everything decent, everything...

Anyway, Gary never showed any signs of interest in the political or philosophical subjects that GB tried to bring up, and he hardly raised his eyes from his coffee cup on the day that GB got talking about America’s great rebirth and revival, and about his own hopes for the future. Because with four more years of Ronald Reagan being nearly a foregone conclusion by that time, there seemed to be no limit to the wonderful things that were about to be accomplished. The cleaning up and sorting out of so many problems over the coming years as the nation’s huge comeback went on and on with no end in sight. The country already having recovered its pride by then, swaggering once again after all those years of liberalism and decay. Winning Olympic medals one after another, and of course there was the glorious victory we had won in Grenada the year before, that loud and clear signal that the Vietnam syndrome was over and done with. Gary didn’t react even when he heard that loaded phrase, however, staring at his coffee instead while GB marveled at the decisiveness of our president and the prowess of our military. Interrupted only once by a few mumbled, barely audible words. Something to the effect

of, “Yeah, and it only took twenty thousand troops to handle those fifty Cuban construction workers.”

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

Gary’s opinions on other current and recent events went completely unspoken, without a mumble or a murmur, and he never raised his eyes on the day when the subject was economic theory: the failures of keynesianism and the wonders of supply-side economics. And so it came as quite a surprise when one day he actually responded to one of GB’s subjects. Responded to what had to be his favorite topic of all: power.

It happened as GB was expounding upon what he liked to call his theorem of power, talking about the importance of power-relationships in the functioning of any healthy society and about the need for the weak to be constantly subordinated to the will of the strong. And though he seemed at first to be doomed to another monologue that day, the big guy’s response came just after the second or third repetition of a line he particularly liked: “Might doesn’t necessarily make right, but it makes the question of right and wrong superfluous since the mighty always get their way no matter what. Because right or wrong, the powerful still take what they want.”

“Hey, I get what ya mean,” Gary said all at once. “You’re talkin’ about that old, ya want it, ya just take it. Right? Ya want it, it’s yours.”

“Yes, something like that.” GB was so taken aback at the unanticipated response, the first hint of interest he had ever heard in any of his pet subjects, that it took a moment for the import to sink in. A moment for him to realize that he had finally found a topic for an actual two-person discussion. And then as he began to warm to his subject over the next few minutes, warm in a way that he never had before in the big guy’s presence, Gary seemed ready to play along. Passively, unenthusiastically perhaps, but play along all the same. His eyes on GB as he rambled on about his philosophy of power and the history of power and the morality of power. The guy even nodding his head once or twice early on, though he never actually spoke until after GB had moved on to the economics of power, mentioning the old cliché about the big fish eating the little fish, and then throwing out another of his favorite phrases at the end. “You know, the whole secret of life is to make sure that you’re always one of the big fish. Make sure that you’re always an eater and never an eatee.”

“Yeah, you’re prob’ly right about that,” Gary muttered in a darkening tone as his eyes dropped toward the counter.

“So uh... So what about you?” GB asked all at once, afraid that he was about to lose the guy again. “Do you want to be a little fish all your life?”

Gary didn’t answer right away, though, not even with a, “Who me?” He just stared at his coffee for a long moment. Silent and pensive, giving away nothing of what he could be thinking or feeling. Until suddenly he looked back up. “What about you?” he answered at last, answered with a question of his own. “Whatta you plannin’ on doin’ with all your power?”

All my power? GB liked the sound of those words when he heard them spoken so plainly. Liked them so much that his own question seemed to vanish from his thoughts, replaced by

visions of himself, his empire. “What am I planning? Well uh...” Where to begin when he had so many plans, he wondered. Buying out this guy and running that guy out of business. All those plans which he had never revealed to anyone, not even Jennifer. So that now with this big man he had known for so short a time, known and liked in a certain way though hardly trusted...? No, the only answer he could give would have to be a broad and general one, spoken in bland and altruistic-sounding terms. An explanation of his plans to save that town and clean it up, to get rid of the drugs and put people to work. Put everyone to work and make it back into the decent place that it once used to be. All the usual cover-story.

“And you?” GB asked as he came to the end, having revealed all that he cared to reveal—nothing—and suddenly aware of his own earlier question once again. The one which the guy had yet to answer. “Are you content to make nothing of your life?”

“Well, I tell ya what about that,” the big guy began with only the slightest hesitation, acting as though he were about to give a direct answer to a direct question for what had to be the first time ever. About to start clearing a few things up at last. “I look at it kinda like what Lao Tzu talks about.” Lao Tzu? GB had heard that name before, though he couldn’t say where or when. “I mean like when he talks about that bowl, how he says that while it may be the clay that gives the thing its shape, it’s the nothingness inside it that makes the bowl useful. Ya know what I mean? Cause like with me, I figure that maybe by makin’ nothin’ outa my life, what I’m really doin’ is I’m makin’ it to where I can be useful someday. Useful for real.”

Wha-a-a-at??

As the lull in the action went on for week after week, summer soon giving way to fall, GB was starting to feel a lot better about the deal he had made with the big guy. Because with all those former deadbeats having started to pay their bills so faithfully, it was looking more and more like five favors might prove to be all he would need. More than he would need, in fact, so that perhaps he could even afford to waste one of them by bringing Gary along while he carried out a job in which no protection was likely to be needed.

It was a situation that involved so little risk that GB could easily have paid someone else to do it for him, or he could even have handled the whole thing on his own, without a bodyguard present. Though since it was a moment that he had been looking forward to for such a long time—the culmination of a big project which was finally coming to fruition as the fall began, and a coup that would be even bigger than the one he pulled off against Charlie—he wanted to do the whole thing up right. Because it wouldn’t be enough simply to run this lowlife scumbag out of business if he could destroy the guy instead. Ruin the entire life of this upstart who’d had the temerity to try competing with him in the logging business.

The man in question had set up business in a town that lay some distance from the one in which GB operated, and from that location he had been bidding on government logging concessions over the last couple of years. Outbidding GB on several occasions and raising the price of doing business even when he lost. Cutting into the profit margin. So that not long after the guy’s first successful bid, GB had set out to get rid of him in any way that he could. Legally if possible, through lawyers and courts and all the rest. He had started out by trying to learn everything that he could about the man and his business in a search for whatever weaknesses he

might find. Something like the one he was quick to discover. Because as it turned out, the guy's entire business model was foolishly fragile, leaving his debts unprotected as he evidently trusted in the good faith of those who had loaned him the money to finance his operations. Trusted them not to sell those debts to the competition as so many proved willing to do once GB began to make them offers. As he bought up everything that he could get his hands on, one debt at a time, until finally with patience and persistence, he had managed to accumulate so much of it that the only thing left to do was to find some technicality in the agreements through which to demand an immediate payment in full. A payment which he knew couldn't possibly be made. And then once he had put the guy's business into default over those debts, it had been the easiest thing in the world for his lawyer to go to court and get an injunction against him, an order for his company to cease operations immediately, and to do so under penalty of law since the order came directly from a judge.

And so as the day arrived on which the injunction was to be served, all he had to do was to drive over to the town in which the business was located and then hand that piece of paper to the owner—the former owner. To perform a duty which would be so easy yet so sweet and uplifting at the same time that GB couldn't imagine hiring anyone to do it for him. Allowing someone else to see the expression that was sure to appear on the guy's face at the moment he saw the injunction: the look of shock and disbelief as he realized all at once that the game was up, that those last few years he had spent in building up his company were gone in a flash. That everything was gone, all his plans, his future. Oh, it was going to be a beautiful sight to behold! Much too beautiful to be missed. And in fact, it was going to be so beautiful that GB wanted someone else along to witness it with him. He wanted Gary.

And GB was practically floating on air as he drove back home an hour or two after that moment of glory. That moment which had surpassed even his own high expectations thanks to the little whimper the guy had let out as he read the injunction. The sound of such utter defeat as he saw all his hopes and dreams suddenly come crashing down around him, smashed to bits while he stood there helpless. Under the gaze of the victor. Of the biggest and most powerful man in that entire region and the now unchallenged boss of the logging industry in all those mountains. The owner of so many other businesses and properties, in fact, that by then he must have been the biggest man in the whole county. Maybe even the whole state. And to make things even better, he knew that in this case everything he had done had been legal, one hundred percent legal, with none of the grey areas that there had been in his dealings with old Charlie.

So GB was ready to celebrate his victory that day. He was ready to stop in at a roadside bar along the way and have a few drinks no matter what the guy with him might have thought. That guy who so far hadn't said a word about any of the things he had witnessed. Not even, "Congratulations." He just sat there in the car instead, silent and subdued, and he followed along in that same quiet way as GB went bursting through the door and strutted up to the bar, ready to howl. Ready to show those cowboy wannabes how real men celebrate as he shouted out his order like he owned the place. "Gimme a scotch and soda. A double!"

"Me? I just want a Seven Up," Gary mumbled the words as he took his seat at the bar. Seven Up! And then as the two of them sat together over the next hour or so, he hardly said another word, his eyes never meeting those of his boss. Never. Not once.

By the time the day of the fourth favor came rolling around, Gary seemed to be ready for action once again, talking and acting like he was ready to go out and do his job. Far more ready than GB who found himself suffering from a serious case of doubt on that day. Because while he knew that the situation they were about to deal with was one that had to be taken care of sooner or later, it was also one that he would have done almost anything to avoid, as unpleasant as it was sure to be. He would have compromised on this one if only there had been some way for him to do so, some middle ground that didn't require a complete surrender on his part.

The situation involved the owner of the local beauty salon, a lady who had been running the place for decades by then and who, even after having been served with an eviction notice, continued to go on as though nothing had happened, as though she would still be there decades hence. And not only was she defying her landlord and refusing to vacate the premises, but at the same time she refused to pay anything on the rent. Not a penny of it. Not even the amount she used to pay back before GB tripled it on her in his effort to drive her out. And what it all meant was that now rather than simply carrying out the plan that he'd originally had in mind for the shop, what he had to do first was to deal with a stubborn and highly vocal troublemaker. Betty, the only true deadbeat left in the entire town as she refused to budge in any way whatsoever, ignoring the warnings and notices she received while telling the whole world that she wasn't afraid of that fat little so-and-so or his big goon either. And she was being so public about it all, setting such a bad example for any would-be deadbeats, that GB knew he had to do something. Knew that he couldn't let her go on acting the way she was.

So this is what I get for trying to do someone a favor, he said to himself as he got ready to face the distasteful chore. This is my reward. Because it hadn't been for himself that he had originally set this plan into motion. No, it had been for Jennifer who complained so often about the boredom she faced while living in that town with no job and nothing to occupy her time. Nothing to do all day long but sit around the house watching TV and putting on weight. And so it had been for her sake that GB had come up with the plan to run Betty out of business. It had been for Jennifer and no one else.

Not that she had ever asked him to set up a business for her to run. Not that she had ever talked to him about anything besides TV shows or her family or their past together. Or increasingly as the months and years rolled by, she had begun to talk about something that she called her biological clock, reminding her husband of the fact that she wasn't getting any younger and that child-bearing would only get harder for her with the passage of time. So that in other words, if they ever wanted to have children, the time was now.

Wanted to have children? Of course GB wanted to have children. Of course he wanted an heir to inherit the empire that he was so relentlessly building up. But the only question he had was, Why did it have to be now? Why couldn't they wait a little longer? Wait until his business interests were on a more stable footing than what they were at present, until the percentage of debt had gone down to a more sustainable level. Because while all that debt he was carrying may have posed no short-term threat thanks to the complex corporate structures he had set up, still any default on his part could have unforeseen and perhaps unfortunate consequences in the longer term since the collapse of one of his shell-companies might raise doubts about the creditworthiness of all his other enterprises. And since those shell-companies were becoming more

numerous and more deeply indebted with each passing day, the juggling act to keep rolling the debt over was getting more complicated all the time. More difficult and more dangerous.

So given the precariousness of their present situation, he had known that he had to come up with some alternative to offer Jennifer. Something for her to do with her time and something to think about besides motherhood. TV and motherhood. Something like a job or a hobby. Some reason for her to get up off that couch every once in a while and hopefully to take off some of the weight that she had been putting on. Something to make her more... you know, more attractive.

Because here he was the richest and most powerful man in town, but he had a wife he was almost ashamed to take out in public anymore, as heavy as she was getting to be. A woman with no resemblance to the slender, beautiful trophy-wife that a man in his position is supposed to have. A woman like... Like what Cindy could be, all dressed up in expensive clothes and hanging onto his arm while the other men lusted after her. Though she would be for him and him alone, the two of them returning home afterwards to... ummm...

I mean, just imagine how it would be to have a woman like that. So beautiful and so... So intimidating in a way, the thought struck him all at once. Because what would he do even if he had her? How would he ever be able to perform under that type of pressure? With a woman who had always gotten any man that she wanted. Tall men and handsome men and athletic...

Enough about Cindy! he said to himself as he suddenly became aware of the hour. This is no time to be thinking about her, and it's no time to be calling up those old... those insecurities or whatever they are. No, this is the time to be thinking about Betty and that beauty salon of hers.

It was time to be setting his plan into motion, heading for the usual gathering spot on the sidewalk outside his office where he had already seen through the window that Gary and the couple of layabouts he had hired to do the actual moving were standing around waiting for him. Their leader. Though as GB arrived at that place and then paused for a moment to look his men over, he couldn't help but search his own thoughts at the same time. Search for some excuse to call the whole thing off. Any excuse that he could come up with. Anything at all. Anything...

"Let's go," he said at last, a slight tremble in his voice which he hoped the others hadn't noticed. Let's go face the wrath of Betty.

The wrath of that lady who came flying at them the moment they stepped through the door of the salon, charging at the big man who led the way with a pair of scissors in her hand, raised and threatening though not actually stabbing at him. So furious in her attack that Gary lurched to a halt at the sight, raised his hands as though ready to defend himself or ready to surrender. Who knew which. A look of confusion on his face like he had no idea how to deal with such a ferocious female cyclone as her. And after that he made no move to confront or disarm her, none to retreat. None to protect those who had come in behind him, either. Not the layabouts who fled back out the door the moment Betty turned her attention upon them, and not GB as he soon became her primary target.

"Help!" he yelled when he saw her coming at him, scissors and all. "Help me!" as the two of them started to run circles around every obstacle in the room, around the chairs and the big guy who stood in the center like a statue. "Help!!" GB's fat legs barely keeping him ahead of

the advanced-middle-aged legs that pursued him. Around and around the room, with Betty stabbing at him each time she began to draw near, and with GB panting heavily from the effort, still crying for help whenever he could spare the breath, as meanwhile the big guy did nothing to come to his boss's aid. As he smiled instead like he thought the whole thing was a joke, looking down from his height upon the fat man and the old lady each time they ran past, and grinning, almost laughing out loud.

Ten times around the room the two of them went, twelve times around. Until finally GB made a break for the door, pulled it shut behind him just as Betty lunged out with one final stab at his hand. And then as he ran and puffed his way down the street to safety, he saw nothing more of what transpired in that beauty shop in his absence. He only heard about it later through a friend of Jennifer's. Heard how Betty halted by the door to hurl insults at him as she watched him go, and how Gary gave in completely the moment she turned her gaze back upon him. How he uttered some words of praise or homage while bowing toward her with a sweep of his arm before walking calmly toward the exit. A big smile appearing on Betty's face as she moved over to let him pass and a, "Come again," or something of the sort.

"Hey, what was that all about back there?" GB demanded the moment the big guy joined him at his refuge down the street. "You were supposed to protect me!"

"Yeah, I guess I didn't do so good at it, huh?" The voice had a quietly sarcastic edge to it.

"You didn't do a bit good at it! I mean a bit well. You didn't... Why, you did such a bad job in there that this thing doesn't even count! I tell you that now. It doesn't count as one of your favors, so you still owe me..."

"What!?" The voice that interrupted him came out with such force, such coiled anger that it sent a chill running through GB's body. Froze his thoughts in mid-sentence. "You're jokin' about that, right?" the guy went on in a tone that was calmer though no less intimidating.

"Well, it's just..." GB tried to recover.

"Cause the deal was for five, and that was number four. Done and delivered."

"But you didn't... You were supposed to..."

"I was supposed to follow orders, and that's what I did. You just never gave me any orders was all."

Give orders? How was he supposed to give orders when he was busy running for his life? Because wasn't the deal that the guy was supposed to protect him? What ever happened to that part of it?

GB attempted to put together an argument along those lines over the next minute or two, though since his words came out with more whining in their tone than authority, the effort proved ineffectual. Gary finally sealing the conversation with an order of his own. "That's four down and one to go, so let's get it over with, okay. Let's do that last favor and let's do it now!"

GB didn't like being rushed in that way, though as he thought about it over the next day or two, he soon came to realize that it was probably for the best to do as the guy had said. To get this thing over with once and for all. Because it was obvious by then that there was no way he would ever convince Gary to do any more "favors" for him, while given his performance in that most recent one, GB wasn't sure that he would have wanted them even if he could have gotten them. Which meant that the only thing left to do was to pick out a good target for that fifth and final favor and then be done with it. To pick out someone who needed and deserved being taken care of. Someone who had been a thorn in his side for a long, long time. From as far back as he could remember. Someone who... Could there be any doubt in his mind that his final target would have to be Al?

That big brother who had made his life so miserable over the years, always so much better than him at everything he did and always so much nicer. Such a great guy that the whole town loved him and respected him. Loved him almost as much as GB hated him. And on top of that there was the fact that Al was now the biggest obstacle he faced in his efforts to consolidate his empire, standing in the way and making it impossible for him ever to shield the one big exposed debt which he still had to worry about: the debt on the old family feed store. Because that was the one and only weak spot in GB's entire business structure, that debt which he was unable to roll over or convert without asking his brother's consent and thereby giving away everything that he was up to. So instead he was being forced to repay the money month after month, draining a part of his cash-flow and putting a strain on all his other finances.

So he had known from early on that he would have to do something about that feed store eventually, have to find some way to get himself out from under it. And as he had worked the problem over in his head, it hadn't taken long to come up with a plan, or at least with the first stages of a plan. One in which he would sell out his interest in the store to Al—debt and all—and in the process, he would even charge his brother for the privilege of getting screwed. Charge him "fair market value" for his quarter share of the store while calculating that value in a way that conveniently ignored the debt and counted only the positive assets.

And it was a good plan that he had put together. So good that he'd already had his lawyer draw up a contract for him long ago, back when he first came up with the idea, so that the only thing left to do was to get that paper signed. Because the minute that was done, his problems would be over. He would be free to do whatever he wanted with his money while Al would be left to take the fall, he and that store of his on a fast track to bankruptcy given the meagerness of the income and the huge debts with which he would be saddled.

But it was precisely the problem of finding some way to get that signature which GB hadn't yet managed to solve. A way of fooling his brother into cutting his own throat. And he had thought about one strategy after another over the last few years, considered them only to reject them for one reason or another, some for being too obvious while others were impossible to pull off. Not one of them good enough to fool a guy who really wasn't that stupid when you got right down to it. A guy who may not have been as smart as his little brother, though that didn't mean that he would fall for just anything. And so GB had been forced to put off the completion of his plan for months and years. Forced to postpone it until he could finally come up with a good, sure-fire way to get that contract signed. One that would work on the first try since

he couldn't afford to give away his hand in a failed attempt, so that whatever he did, it had to work. It absolutely had to.

And as he looked around him now, as he looked at all the years of waiting and the complete absence of good options which he still had left, he finally said to himself calmly, What about force? Sheer brute force. What about using Gary's last favor to go over there and do some serious arm-twisting? Getting him to put the fear of God into that asshole brother of mine while I tell him to sign the paper and sign it now. Or else!! Because with that big man standing there beside me...

That big man who I hope I can trust, the thought came sneaking up on him. Hope he doesn't go and pull a Charlie on me with all that hesitation and that... Or hope he doesn't pull a Betty! Because look at the way he acted that day, look at the way he... No, don't even think about that!! Don't even consider the possibility. Not when there's so much riding on this thing. Not when he has to come through for me, he absolutely has to. He just... He has to!

As the morning of the big day dawned, that dark and rainy fall day after the thunderstorms of the night before, GB was as ready to go as he would ever be. Ready to put an end to his problems once and for all. And his nerves were tingling with anticipation as he got dressed, his hands practically shaking as he pulled on his fanciest boots and got out his biggest cowboy hat to wear. His guts telling him to go out there and get this thing over with, while at the same time bidding him, Stop! Run away. Wishing down inside that it was already finished somehow. Wishing that it was already in the past so that he wouldn't have to go out there and go through with it now.

"Hello Mr. GB," Gary said with unexpected warmth as GB approached the spot where the guy stood waiting on the sidewalk at the appointed hour, standing under cover from the rain. "I just wanted to say somethin' before this thing gets started today, okay? I wanted to thank ya for what ya did for me, givin' me that job and all. Cause I tell ya, I sure did need it at the time. And all those days I been spendin' out there in the woods, well it's been real good for me. It's been helpin' me get my head together."

"Yes, of course..." GB said distractedly, trying not to lose his train of thought, and he hesitated for a moment when Gary stuck out his right hand a bit tentatively. He wavered for a second before reaching out and grabbing on, feeling that big, calloused hand wrap itself around his own soft, pudgy hand, sending a sensation up his spine that was... It was...

"I really mean it. Thanks," Gary reiterated as he released his grip.

"Well think nothing of it." The words came automatically as GB struggled to maintain his bearings after that... that... whatever it could have been. So strange and so... Strange but not weird, not... you know, perverted. That feeling like he always got in the big guy's presence, it must have been, though stronger now by multiples. Overwhelming almost as he touched the guy for the first time ever, he realized all at once. Their first physical contact. Because they hadn't shaken hands even when they sealed their bargain months before. Not until now, they hadn't. Not until this moment and this...

"I just wanted to say that before I go."

“Go!?” The sound of that word struck such a nerve as to draw his attention even further from where it should have been. “Are you leaving after this is over?”

“Yeah, I’m thinkin’ I will.”

“Really? And where...? Where’ll you go?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I thought I might go to Nevada or somethin’, go lose some-a this money I been makin’ around here. And then after that, I guess it’ll prob’ly be the coast, cause ya know that’s where my real work is.”

His real work? What was he talking about? GB wondered. His shipping whatever it was that he shipped for a living? He did that on the coast?

GB’s mind was in a muddle by now, wanting to ask those questions and wanting to delve into that, uh... that... other thing as well, though at the same time he knew that he couldn’t allow himself to be distracted from the great matter that lay before him. His thoughts leaning this way and that way over the next several seconds, this way and that way. Until finally Gary spoke again, “So what’s it all about today?”

“Oh, today? What’s it about...?” Thank you, said GB in silence as the question drew his mind back toward where it should have been all along. Away from that little... that... distraction and back toward the present. Their mission for the day.

And so regathering his thoughts as he began to speak, he was soon explaining what he considered to be the relevant details of what lay ahead, Gary listening all the while in silence and showing no sign of what he thought or felt about the things he heard, not even nodding his head, while the expression on his face revealed nothing at all. No sign of pity when GB told about how his brother had abused him during all the years they were growing up together, and there was no sign of anger or righteous indignation when he said that even at that moment, his brother was continuing to cheat him, using the store as a way to extort money from him by threatening to ruin all his other businesses if he ever failed to pay the money that the guy demanded. Gary said nothing as he listened to that slightly distorted portrayal of the facts, and his response was little more than a grunt when told that his job that day was to force a signature from that bully of a brother. To force him to sign a paper that would release GB from his tyrannical grasp once and for all and set him free at last. Free at last!

Free! he repeated to himself once again as he paused to look the man over. Still no indication that the things he’d just heard had made the least impression, as GB felt something starting to stir deep inside. Those earlier doubts coming back to life, it appeared, urging him to call the whole thing off while there was still time. Urging him to run away. Or at least urging him to pray for the best. Pray even though he wasn’t particularly interested in religion.

And GB went on praying silently as he led the way to his car and then drove the three or four blocks to their destination, so nervous by the time they arrived that he couldn’t stop his hands from trembling as he set the parking brake and reached for the door handle. His stomach acid eating away at him as he swung the door open and got out with the big hat tucked under his arm to protect it from the rain while he made his approach to the feed store. His mind telling him

all the while, This is it. This is the moment you've been waiting for all your life. This is the moment you're gonna get even at last. You're gonna... Oh, God! I hope it all works out.

And his adrenaline was pumping like never before as he stopped under the little awning outside the door to place the hat on his head and polish his boots on the backs of his calves, as he walked inside after that with his big assistant in tow, looking around that drafty old building to find that there wasn't a single customer in sight. No one prowling around the bins of feed or the piles of bags that filled the place. No one but Al who sat behind the counter with a book in hand, so deeply absorbed in what he was reading that it wasn't until GB had nearly reached the counter that he finally looked up.

"Hey GB, it's good to see ya," said Al as he got to his feet—or rather to his foot and his pegleg—with a big smile coming over his face. That phony smile he always had for GB. "How ya been doin'? And how's Jennifer?"

"Fine," GB said curtly, trying not to let the guy's cheery tone distract him from his own thoughts. Trying not to lose concentration on the mission ahead.

"Man, it's been a long time since I seen ya, either one-a ya. So uh... So ya say you're doin' okay, huh?"

"Yes, fine."

"And you, uh... Hey ya know what, you guys oughta come over sometime. Ya oughta come and eat supper at my place or somethin'. Cause like I may not be that much of a cook, but I sure know how to make spaghetti. So whattaya say?"

"I don't know." GB continued to say as little as he could while Al went on in that phony-friendly tone of his, pretending to be his friend in the same way that he always had. Whenever he wasn't busy showing him up in everything he did, that is. Winning at sports or hanging out with his cool friends. Mr. Nice Guy. Mr. Everybody's Friend, Everybody's Hero.

Because what was wrong with this guy? GB wondered as he listened to him prattle on in that inane way. Talking like he thought the two of them were the best friends in the world. Like he had no idea what his little brother really thought of him. Like he couldn't tell the difference between GB's quiet disdain for him and everything that he stood for and the sort of unspoken brotherly love that siblings supposedly feel toward one another. As though the simple fact that his brother's disdain had never been expressed in so many words somehow made it invisible to him.

"So what can I do for ya today?" Al asked as his brother's short, cold responses to his friendly questions seemed to sink in at last. And as he became aware of the big guy who stood just behind his brother's shoulder.

"I just... I came here with a business proposition is what. A good one," GB added quickly, trying to put things in as positive a light as he could here at the beginning. And trying to remember all those scripted lines which he had been running through his head over the last few

days as well. Over the last few years. “Because I want to, uh... I want to sell you my interest in this store is what.”

“Sell it to me? Shoot man, what’m I supposed to pay ya with?”

“Or give it to you, I mean. Practically give it to you, because I can give you a very good deal on it.” GB knew that he had used the wrong word, knew that he should have started right out with the word give. “And what little it’s gonna cost you, I can let you have all the time you need to pay for it. There’s no hurry on that.”

“No? So then why d’ya wanta sell it to me if ya don’t need the money?” A clear tone of suspicion had crept into Al’s voice.

“Oh, it’s just... I don’t have the time for it anymore, that’s the problem. So I want to, uh... I want to concentrate on other things.”

“But ya don’t spend any time on this store as it is, do ya?”

“Oh yes I do, I spend a lot more time than you might think.” A whole lot more, all the time I have to spend shuffling money around to make those monthly payments.

“Yeah? So let me get this straight. Ya say that you’re gonna let me have this store for almost nothin’. You’re gonna let me have it for whatever I can afford to pay. Is that right?”

“Yes...”

“So okay then, what’s the catch?”

“Catch!?” GB hadn’t been expecting that one. “There’s no catch.”

“Ah come on, man. There’s always a catch with you. Cause I know ya. So I know there’s gotta be a catch.”

“No, there’s no catch. There’s no...”

“Then why’d ya bring your goon along with ya if there’s no catch?” Al shot the question out before his brother had finished, cutting him off and leaving him speechless all at once.

Leaving the entire room in silence for the next second or two until Gary’s soft, deep voice broke in. “I’m no goon.”

“You’re not!?” Al looked him directly in the face for the first time. “Well then whattaya call yourself, threatenin’ people and doin’ my brother’s dirty work for him?”

“I call myself Gary,” came the reply in that same gentle tone.

“Ya what...?” Al stopped and stared at the guy, clearly taken aback by what he had just heard. His face a blank as the words seemed to work their way through his brain, until suddenly

he lit up into a big smile and burst out laughing. “Well hi there, Gary. My name’s Al,” he said as the big guy smiled back.

Oh God! GB said to himself. What’s happening now? Are those two making friends? What about my plan? What about my plan!?

At least they didn’t shake hands, was the only consolation he could find as his big brother turned his attention back toward him. “So what ya wanta do is sell me this store, right? Sell me your part of it.”

“Yes...” GB didn’t know what to say next, not with the way his plan seemed to be imploding on him.

“And ya wanta sell it debt and all, right?”

“Debt? What debt?” The mention of that word caught GB by such surprise that the only thing he could think to do was to play dumb. To pretend that he didn’t know anything about the debt, or at least that he had forgotten about it. All the while asking himself, Now how did he know about that? How did he know about the debt?

“So the deal is that you’re gonna pay it off before ya give me the store, right? That’s gotta be the deal cause it’s the only fair way to do it.”

Fair? What does fair have to do with it? This is business. “Well it’s not, uh... I don’t know how to...”

“So ya wanta dump it on me, huh? Is that your plan? Ya wanta dump all that debt onto me?”

“No, I don’t...” GB was at such a loss by now that it was hard for him even to stutter or mumble. Hard to do anything but watch in horror as his beautiful plan died an agonizing death right before his eyes, his brother ahead of him at every step and his so-called secret weapon, his goon, showing no signs of life.

“So you’re gettin’ tired-a all that debt ya been buildin’ up, and ya wanta unload some of it, huh? Ya wanta dump it onto me?”

No... Please...

“Cause what? Ya got too much of it to handle anymore?” Al went on in response to his brother’s stunned silence. “All that money ya owe on everything ya got. Cause like, how much is it by now, anyway? It’s gotta be a helluva lot, the way so many people are talkin’ about it.”

People talking about it!? People...?

“And ya know, the thing I always wonder about when I hear that talk is I say: What would Dad say about it? What would he say about the way ya been doin’ business?”

“Dad!?” What does he have to do with this? Why bring him into it?

“Cause I know he had some crazy ideas about a lotta stuff, but the one thing ya can say about him is that he was always an honest businessman. He never cheated anyone, and he never tried to pull anything dirty, and he never ran up a debt that he wasn’t ready to pay off. Not like what you been doin’.”

Oh please. Please...

“No, cause you learned none-a that stuff from him. None-a that king-a debt shit ya been pullin’. So ya musta got it... I guess ya got it from your buddy Reagan, huh?”

“Reagan...?” Please don’t bring him into this. Not now. Not when I’m in no condition to fight back.

“Yeah, cause I was just readin’ somethin’ about that the other day, about all the debt he’s been runnin’ up. And it was like... It was about this guy named Albert Johnson who says...”

“Albert Johnson?” Gary broke into the conversation with the most surprising lilt of enthusiasm in his voice. “You been readin’ Albert Johnson?”

“Well, I didn’t actually read him,” Al’s eyes left his little brother as he turned to address his new acquaintance. His new friend, it appeared. “I just read this article about him is all. Cause like I don’t even know where to find his books or anything...”

“Find em? Shit man, I got his latest one. I can let ya have it if ya want.”

“Oh do ya?”

What is this? GB asked himself. Who is this Johnson character and what are they talking about? And is there anything left of my plan? Is there any hope at all?

“Yeah, cause like what ya were just sayin’ about the debt, man he talks all about it in the book,” the big guy went on with growing passion. Displaying emotions which GB never would have thought possible. “And he says that when all those Reagan-types get to talkin’ about it, they always get the whole thing backwards. Completely backwards, like a hundred-and-eighty degrees out.”

“Yeah, the guy who wrote the article said somethin’ about that. He says that like...” Al seemed to hesitate.

“Well, Johnson says that they got it backwards when they go around sayin’ that the deficit is the only problem with Reaganomics. Cause like according to him, the deficit is actually the only solution that Reagan’s got to offer. He says that everything else he’s been doin’ is nothin’ but window-dressing, and the only thing he’s really done to fix anything up is he’s been usin’ that deficit to stimulate the economy.”

“Like somethin’ about him bein’ a backdoor Keynes, right? Isn’t that what he called Reagan?”

Reagan equated to Keynes!? Oh, the horror! The horror!!

“Yeah, that’s what he calls him. Cause like instead-a usin’ the front door and spendin’ more money, what he’s been doin’ is he’s usin’ the backdoor. He’s been usin’ tax-cuts. But either way ya do it, ya end up with the same thing. Ya end up with government deficits stimulin’ the economy. With the government pumpin’ more money into it, into what he calls the productive part-a the economy, than what it’s takin’ out in taxes.”

Reagan and Keynes! Reagan and Keynes! GB couldn’t get that awful image out of his mind.

“And ya know, the worst part about it is that with the deficits bein’ this big and goin’ on for this long, pretty soon we’re gonna get the country hooked on em. That’s what Johnson says, anyway. He says that it’s just like with drugs where ya build up a tolerance to em so ya gotta keep takin’ more and more if ya wanta get the same effect. Ya know? And like someday we’re gonna have to do the exact same thing with these deficits. We’re gonna have to run even bigger ones than what Reagan is if we ever wanta stimulate anything again.”

Oh my God! Drugs and Reagan!? Now the guy’s talking about drugs and Reagan in the same breath? That’s it! I’m finished!! GB vowed to himself. That’s all I’m gonna listen to. I’m not gonna let myself hear another word they say. Nothing! Not a sound. Not a peep. La-la-la...

“Ya know, he’s been payin’ ya somethin’ like half-a union scale,” he heard Al say at one point.

“Yeah, I figured it was somethin’ like that.”

Unions! Now they’re talking unions!? So what’s next? Painting hammer-and-sickles on the walls? No, forget about it! GB recalled his vow all at once. Because I shouldn’t have listened to that. I should have just... I’ve gotta stop listening to what those two commies have to say. I’ve gotta tune it all back out. La-la-la...

“Yeah, shippin’ sucks right now. American-flag shippin’ sucks, anyway,” he heard from Gary’s lips some time later. “Cause like it’s about the worst it’s ever been. Ever.”

What was that? The American flag sucks? Or shipping American flags sucks? What the heck is he talking about now?

“It’s your life though, huh?” Al said in response.

“Yeah man, so I guess there’s nothin’ I can do about it but just go back to whatever’s left. Go back there and ride the thing to the bottom.”

“Like what I’m doin’ with this store, huh? Ridin’ it to the bottom.”

To the bottom! The very bottom, you commies, GB shouted at them in silence. All the way to H-E-Double-Hockey-Stick. Because that's where guys like you end up. Right down there where you burn, burn, burn.

"Hey, I tell ya what, GB," Al spoke to him all at once, drawing his attention back toward the here-and-now whether he wanted it there or not. "I'm gonna go ahead and sign that contract-a yours."

"You what?" GB couldn't believe his ears. His plan coming to a successful conclusion after all! That plan which he had long since given up for dead, revived all at once as if by some miracle. His plan, his hopes.

"Only thing is, I'm gonna make a few changes in it before I do."

"But you can't..." No!! That's not how it's supposed to work.

"Like first of all, you're gonna pay off all that debt before ya give me the store. And I mean pay it off, too. All of it."

"But I can't..."

"Oh yes ya can, and I'll tell ya how," Al hardly gave his brother time to breathe as he pushed ahead. "You're gonna sell some-a your assets is what you're gonna do, some of em that ya been losin' money on anyway, and then you're gonna take that money and use it to pay off everything this store owes."

But... But... The words failed to form in GB's mouth.

"Isn't he?" Al turned and spoke to Gary all at once. "He's gonna agree to all that, and he's gonna sign the paper, right?"

"Yeah," the big guy said softly.

"And second thing," Al turned back to his brother. "Second thing is that the price I'm gonna pay ya is twenty spaghetti dinners at my place. You and Jennifer and any kids ya might have before it's paid off. You're gonna come over and eat at my place twenty times."

"Twenty dinners? You've gotta be kidding." GB's voice was back all at once, shocked into action by the horror of what he had just heard.

"Oh, ya think that's not enough? Okay then, we can make it thirty dinners if ya want."

"No! Not that!" More of that torture? More time spent with my asshole brother? Anything but that!

"Okay then, twenty like I said."

Almost before GB knew it, his big goon was turning on him completely, snatching the contract from his pocket and handing it over to Al who began to read through it. Crossing out phrases and adding a few of his own.

No! You can't do that, GB wanted to scream. You have to leave it the way I wrote it. And then as he stood helplessly watching his brother work his way through the document, he heard those comforting words from the past coming back to him now. He heard that old mantra: I'm gonna get even with these guys someday. I'm gonna own em. I'm gonna buy em and sell em.

Al was interrupted at one point by a customer who came in wanting to buy some bags of feed, but since he handed the papers over to the big guy for safe-keeping while he attended to her, GB never had a chance to get at them. No chance to snatch them and flee, and no chance to re-revise them. And it was only when Al had been through the entire document and then spread the pages out on the counter for him to sign that GB ever saw it up close again.

"Go ahead and sign it, Mr. GB. It'll be good for ya," the big guy coaxed him in that quiet tone of his that GB always found so intimidating somehow. "You'll be glad ya did it someday."

Glad I ruined myself and everything I've built up over the years?

"I don't know about you, though," Gary turned to speak to Al. "I don't know if this is gonna work out or not. I mean, all them spaghetti dinners."

"Hey man, he's my brother, so I guess I'm stuck with him," Al said as though half in jest.

"Yeah, and ya know, he's really not that bad of a guy when ya get right down to it," Gary responded in that same light-hearted tone.

Oh, if only he knew, GB said to himself. If only he knew what's really in my heart.

"Man, if ya only knew," Al seemed to echo his brother's thoughts. "Cause he can be pretty damn difficult sometimes. He always has been."

Difficult? You don't even know what difficult is. Not yet.

"But ya know, he can't be all bad. Cause like look at Jennifer who he's married to. She's a great lady. So he's gotta have somethin' goin' for him to get a woman like her. And besides that, he's family. He's the only family I got left anymore, so I guess I'm stuck with him."

"Yeah, cause family is family, man. No gettin' around that."

As the two men returned their attention to the contract a moment later, GB wanted to resist the pressure that was being applied to him. He wanted to fight back, though he knew that he couldn't, not when it was two against one. He wasn't built for that sort of thing, and he couldn't have stood up to them even if he'd pulled out his gun, so that there was nothing for him to do right then but to give in and admit that he had lost this particular battle. Though that didn't mean that he had lost the entire war. Not by a long shot, it didn't! Because this thing wasn't over with yet, not until he said it was. Not until he finally got even for all those years and those...

A dog! GB said to himself all at once as he watched his brother fold the signed papers and put them away. That's what I need is a dog. A big, vicious attack dog that I can sic on anyone I want to. A dog that'll do whatever I say and attack anyone I tell it to. No hesitation and no making friends with the enemy. Just attack. Attack! Attack!!

PART VIII

HESITATION

In which any remaining doubts and second thoughts come to the fore.

ENTER GABRIEL

The tradition in Gabriel's family was to give their children fancy-sounding names but then to call them by shorter, simpler nicknames. That was the case with his oldest brother Julius who was always known as Jojo, and it was also the case with his next-older brother Augustus whom they redubbed Joji. When it came his own turn for a name, however, the family evidently decided that the time had come to break the pattern. No Roman emperors for him and no Joju or anything of the sort, but instead they chose to name him after an Archangel and then to use a nickname that was far more conventional for a member of the Filipino culture within which he was raised. They chose to call him Gabo.

Not that he was any more conventional than his brothers, mind you. Jojo the wildman, always so outspoken and outgoing, or Joji the steady, dependable one, while Gabo was the... He was... What was he?... He was the flexible one would be the best way to describe him perhaps, the one who was always ready to adapt himself to his circumstances. As friendly and talkative as the one brother or as quiet and serious as the other, depending upon his surroundings and the company he was keeping. As though the people around him brought out one personality or the other or yet another according to how they acted themselves or even the expectations they seemed to hold about him. And as he followed the lead of whoever he happened to be with at the time, he always did so in an involuntary, almost organic way.

Because it wasn't that Gabo was the yes-man that some ungenerous types might accuse him of being. He was simply a follower instead, a person who felt most comfortable when he had someone else to show him the way and tell him what to do. An adult or an older brother when he was young, a Bosun or a Mate in later years after he had grown up and gone to sea. Someone to make his decisions for him and relieve him of that heavy burden, the awesome responsibility of having to decide things for himself.

And he was that way with everything he did, whether big or small. With the day-to-day decisions about where to go or what to eat, and with the major life-changing decisions as well. Big decisions such as the one to follow in the footsteps to the other men in his family—his father, his uncles, his brothers—by going to sea when he grew up. To ship out despite the fact that he had sworn as a child never to do so, sworn again and again that he would never subject his own children to something like what he had been through while growing up, his father always gone, always off working on a ship somewhere so that he was never around when his children needed or wanted him. And in fact, the situation had been so bad during the early years of Gabo's childhood, his father such a stranger to him, that there came a day when he was four or five years old that he had no idea who the man could even be. It was a day when his father

returned home after a long absence spent aboard some flag-of-convenience ship, his hair grown out long since it was the year 1970, more-or-less, and Gabo staring at him, staring for the longest time. So confused by the whole thing that finally he had gone up to one of his older brothers and asked, "Who's that lady talking to Mama?"

So Gabo had no intention of following in those footsteps, though of course he did so in the end. He followed along as he always did. Followed his father and his brothers, though not the earlier generations of his family since for them the tradition had been something quite different.

They had worked as contract laborers in Hawaii over many years, over decades in fact. His grandfather, his great-grandfather. They had worked there almost from the first day that Hawaiian companies began to hire their laborers in the Philippines, traveling over to that other set of islands to harvest pineapples or sugar cane or to perform similar duties before returning to their own islands upon completion of their contracts. And then as they arrived back home each time, they would spend some of their earnings in the purchase of land and houses, even a little store, so that over the years they had gradually risen to become one of the most prosperous and respected families in the entire town. A family that was living the good life and wanting for nothing. The living, breathing model of the Filipino Dream.

Until suddenly along came the war and everything fell apart. Because as the Japanese moved in and took over the islands, they soon began to arrest anyone they could find who had American connections, which in the case of Gabo's family meant all the men and even some of the women. The whole group of them rounded up except for one man who managed to escape and join the resistance and die for his country in that way. They were rounded up and taken off somewhere, most of them never to be seen again while the few who survived were never quite the same, either physically or mentally. And so by the time that MacArthur had made his return, by the time the war was finally over, there was little left of the family but a lot of widows and orphans and a few broken men, Gabo's grandfather not one of them. And it was a grim situation that they faced trying to get by in those tough postwar years, with so much of the family fortune having been lost or destroyed during the war while the rest soon had to be sold off in their daily struggle to make ends meet. Sold for almost nothing, for a few bowls of rice as the family steadily fell from its status as one of the richest in town to one of the poorest.

So desperately poor during those years that Gabo's father had to go to work even as a small child. No school for him since he had to earn whatever pennies he could. And then no sooner was he big and strong enough to perform heavier labor than he set out to obtain the sort of contract labor in Hawaii that his family's earlier fortune had been built upon. He went off to the big city, hoping to find a place for himself in a world which unfortunately had changed drastically in the last half-generation. With all the old family connections gone by then, either dead or moved away or out of the business, so that he was forced to start from scratch. He was still too young to work in Hawaii, the first contractor he approached told him. The Americans wouldn't accept child laborers. Though he might try another, less scrupulous place if he was truly desperate for work, the man went on. A certain contractor who wouldn't send him off to Hawaii or some other foreign land, but instead would send him out to sea. Get him a job on one of those broken-down old ships that hired their crews in the Philippines.

Because those were the years when flag-of-convenience shipping was on the rise, with company after company re-registering their ships in countries where they would be exempt from paying taxes or following any of the usual safety standards. Countries that would allow them to do as they pleased and to hire anyone they chose. Anyone they could find who was willing to work on their sometimes dangerously unseaworthy vessels for the starvation-wages that they offered to pay. And as those companies went in search of seamen, many of them quickly zeroed in upon the Philippines where they discovered that they could find good, hardworking men who were willing to do precisely that. Willing to work on those old ships for next to nothing in the way of pay, as Gabo's father soon began to do.

His father and his uncles who followed their brother's lead as soon as they were old enough, taking jobs on those low-paying ships where they would serve out year-long, two-year-long contracts. And where they would come home at the end with so little money in their pockets after what they had been sending to the family to get by on while they were gone, that it would be a matter of months, perhaps mere weeks, before they had to ship back out again. Had to return to that sea-going life and leave behind their real lives which they only managed to live during the short intervals between ships. Getting married and starting families which would grow in their absence as they often returned home at the end of a contract to meet a new child for the first time. A new son or daughter who had been born while they were out working and providing the family with its meager existence. With just enough money to keep themselves alive and to raise those kids who, to all appearances, were doomed to become the next generation of poor and desperate and easily exploited seamen.

That was how their future must have seemed to Gabo's father, anyway. Until a day came when things finally began to break his way for the first time. A day when he got a chance to emigrate to the United States thanks to the efforts of one of his parents' cousins or something of the sort. The only "American" from all those earlier generations who had come through the war unscathed.

She was a lady who had been working in Hawaii at the time of Pearl Harbor, so that she had missed out on the occupation of her home islands. She had spent the entire war in those other islands instead, working wherever she was needed, wherever she could find a job, and in the meantime she had met the man who would prove to be the love of her life. She had fallen in love with an American sailor who was stationed in Hawaii during the war, married him and settled down afterwards to spend the rest of her life with him. To live in his part of the country and to acquire U.S. citizenship in the process.

And though she never returned to live in the Philippines after the war, she never lost contact with the remnants of her family back home either. She would sometimes send small amounts of money to those most closely related to her, and she made what efforts she could to get permission for them to move to the States. She wrote letters and made visits to the local immigration office until finally with time—and with the evolution of the laws on immigration—her efforts began to pay off. She began to bring her family members over to the United States one at a time, her brother and sisters and nieces and nephews, followed by her cousins. Gabo's aunts and uncles and finally his father along with the rest of the immediate family.

They all moved to Hawaii, father and mother and school-aged children. They moved to that state in which certain other relatives had already taken up residence and where, as his father joined a union and began to ship out aboard American-flag ships, suddenly he was making a decent wage for the first time in his life. He and his family living well for the first time in a generation, with plenty to eat and even a little money left over for the extras. For all those little things that they had dreamed about back at their old home. And while the kids quickly adapted to their new home and circumstances, they did so in their own sort of way, speaking more Tagalog than English as they grew up since most of their friends came from the islands' tight-knit Filipino community. And they never cut their emotional ties to their homeland even as they acquired U.S. citizenship the moment they became eligible, but instead they still carried the Philippine Islands around in their hearts even as they officially became Americans. Filipino-Americans.

The boys in the family followed in their father's footsteps as they came of age, Jojo and Joji and Gabo himself, not to mention the younger brother who came behind him. They all joined the union straight out of high school, signed up for its training school where they could acquire their seaman's documents and then ship out just like their father and uncles did. They all followed that family tradition whether enthusiastically or not.

They set out to join that industry, though as bad luck would have it, they did so just at a time when the whole thing appeared to be on the verge of total collapse. A time called the eighties, one of the bleakest, most disastrous decades in the whole long, up-and-down history of the U.S. Merchant Marine. It was a decade during which the number of American-flag ships shrank so drastically that it seemed at times to be on its way toward zero. With companies collapsing one after another in those years, falling victim to the ravages of the containerization revolution and to the near total indifference—if not outright hostility—of the administration in power. An administration which, whether consciously or not, always seemed to be doing the bidding of the foreign ship-owners' lobby: the owners and operators of all those substandard flag-of-convenience ships which were steadily undermining the position of the old-line companies. Because the administration gave no help whatsoever to American companies as they struggled to make the difficult and expensive transition to the new realities of international shipping. And in fact, it seemed at times to be doing everything it could to tie those companies' hands and hinder their efforts, forcing them to play by some imaginary set of free-market rules while they tried to compete against foreign carriers that were either highly subsidized by their own governments or else bottom-feeding flag-of-convenience operations. So that as the decade proceeded, more and more of those American companies kept going belly-up.

And that made it a very tough time for a young person to be starting out, with jobs for less-than-full-book members of the union so scarce that only the most dedicated, or those with the most well-established support structures, ever managed to hold out. Only they managed to break into the shipping industry during those dark and difficult years. Young people such as Gabo who had a whole family there to support him, not to mention the Tagalog telegraph, that word-of-mouth among Filipino seamen which came to his rescue any number of times during the years before he got his full book. Because the telegraph would let him know about jobs that were about to come up unexpectedly, allowing him to be there in the right place at the right time in order to get them despite his low standing within the union.

There to pick up those entry-level Ordinary Seaman jobs which he always went after even as they vanished at an ever-increasing rate thanks to the shrinking number of ships and the reductions in crew size on the few that remained. And in the end, Gabo managed to get his AB ticket just in time, just before it became nearly impossible for a young man to do so. No way to get all the sea-time that was required in those by then nearly non-existent Ordinary jobs, while at the same time it was still years before the Coast Guard would respond to the new realities within the industry by revising its standards. He got that endorsement which his little brother never managed to get, forced to spend his career in the stewards' department instead.

So Gabo became an AB, an Able Bodied Seaman as it used to be called, and with that he found that already in his early twenties, he had arrived at the height of his ambitions. He had acquired the highest status that he ever hoped to achieve in life, an AB and a full-book member of the union. A young man living the good life as he shipped out of the Honolulu hall, while between ships he would share a house with his brothers and one of his sisters and her husband who also went to sea, share that house with whoever happened to be in town at the time. And as he settled into that typical young seaman's life, he soon discovered that it was actually far more pleasant than what he had imagined while growing up. Infinitely more pleasant than what life as a seaman's son had been. Because he enjoyed all the companionship that he got from his various shipmates, from most of them anyway, and he loved being able to go out and cut loose whenever he made it ashore, either in the ports they visited or when he was at home between ships. He loved throwing his money away as fast as he made it, secure in the knowledge that he could always fall back upon his family's support once it was gone. He could always count on them to keep him going until he got another ship and got back on his feet. Got more money to throw away as he went his happy, care-free way, single since he had yet to meet the right Filipina woman, and with no one in the world to worry about but himself.

So then why would he want to ruin such a beautiful situation as that by becoming a Mate or even a Bosun? Gabo asked himself. Why would he want to move up to one of those positions of responsibility in which he would be forced to become a leader? Forced to make decisions! To leave behind that safe and comfortable life as an AB in which he had nothing to do but follow instructions while those other guys did all the decision-making for him. Nothing to say but, "Whatever you think, Mate," each time he was asked for an opinion. "I agree." With no thinking for himself required, just acting. Just doing as he was told.

And if he didn't actually agree with what the Mate had to say, what did that matter? He wasn't there to get into arguments, he was just there to do his job. To go along and get along. So that if the guy said something that he didn't like, he could always talk about it later with one of his friends in the crew. He could say what he really thought about that Mate after the guy's back was turned while holding it all in during his time on the bridge. Giving Mates the silent treatment in the worst couple of cases that he encountered, as he would answer those guys in nothing but monosyllables while quietly resisting their leadership. Quietly making it clear that he had followed their leads as far as he was going to.

Because to tell you the truth, the follower is the real leader in a relationship like that. Gabo became ever more convinced of that fact as his experience grew. Convinced that it's always the follower who controls the situation since he's the one who decides when the relationship begins and when it ends. He's the one who decides when he's going to follow along

and when he's going to break things off and go in search of another leader. While as for the leader, the only thing he can do is lead, just go off to wherever it is that he's going.

So none of that was for him, none of that leadership stuff. Not when life was so much more enjoyable as an AB with nothing to worry about and nothing to plan for beyond his next ship. Nothing to do but to get off one ship and then register at the union hall, pick up the shipping-card which he would use when the time came to go back to work. And he always registered in the Honolulu hall since that was where he lived. He registered there every time but once, that is. That time in his mid-twenties when he made what had to be the biggest blunder of his entire life. That time when he allowed himself to get talked into some damn-fool plan by a guy he only vaguely knew, agreed to go along with something that he should have resisted if only he had been capable of standing up to an aggressive, fast-talking guy like that one. If only he had been able to stand up for himself just that once.

The object of the plan was to recover a certain AB job which had been lost from the Honolulu hall some time back when a guy had gotten himself fired while the ship was on its way to a California port, his replacement called over there so that the people who shipped out of the islands were left with one less job to choose from. And it was in order to remedy that situation that the guy with the plan asked for someone from Honolulu who had just gotten off a ship in the last couple of days—someone like Gabo, there to register that very day—to go over and get the job back for them. To fly to California and register at the hall there before returning to the islands to let his shipping-card age, heading to the West Coast a second time when the job was about to come up and then taking it with what would be a very good shipping-card by that time. Bringing the job back home in the end since he would ask to get off the ship in Honolulu just as his time was about to run out.

“No,” said Gabo when he heard the plan being presented to him that day. “Not me.” “No, I don’t wanta do it.” “No, no, no.” And finally, “Yes.” Giving in at the end and setting into motion a series of events which he would come to regret. Events which would end in disaster through no fault of his own since he followed that supposedly fool-proof plan to the letter only to become the principle victim of its failure. Because he did everything exactly as he had been told. He flew to California and registered there before flying back home, and he made the second trip as well. He flew to the coast a second time and walked into the union hall on the day that the job was supposed to come up, and he threw in his shipping-card when it appeared on the board. He set that little piece of paper into the box on the counter and then stood back to wait for his name to be called. Watching as the dispatcher pulled the cards out and shuffled through them and finally called out a name. Called out... a name that wasn’t Gabo’s!! The name of some local guy who happened to have registered a few days before him.

What!!? Gabo could hardly believe his ears as he heard that unfamiliar name strike them. What just happened? How did I get beat out? And what am I gonna do now!? Because all of a sudden there he was, stuck on the West Coast without a job or a ticket home or even so much as a place to stay. Not much money on him either, and no family or friends nearby. No one to lead him and tell him what to do next.

And as he stood there in shock, his whole safe, comfortable world seemed to have fallen out from underneath him all at once, left him lost and rudderless and completely without

direction. His eyes searching everywhere around that room for someone to save him. Flitting from face to face, black and white and brown, a few of them familiar and a couple he had sailed with before though neither had been his friends aboard ship. They had just been people was all, same as every other face he saw in the hall that day. Just people, regular old people, with not a savior in sight anywhere. Not a leader.

Until finally his glance came to rest upon a Filipino guy he had spoken with briefly when he first came in that morning. Cornelius, he thought the guy had called himself. A man who was many years older than him and one who hadn't left much of an impression during their short encounter. Untrustworthy or perhaps just a bit on the stupid side, he had seemed to Gabo, though at least the guy was a Filipino and at least he had been friendly enough when the two of them spoke. So that now with no other direction in which to turn, Gabo's desperation soon led him to Cornelius, walking over to where the man stood and then pouring out his heart. In Tagalog. Asking about ships and jobs that would be coming up, and also asking about places in which he could stay. Asking for whatever help he could get.

And fortunately, Cornelius came through for him that day. He came through part way, in any case, because he said, "No problem, you can stay with me," when it came to the housing dilemma. Though when it came to the questions about shipping, he seemed to have no idea what he was talking about, describing three or four AB jobs which he said would be coming up later on that week. Jobs which never actually materialized, as it turned out, so that by the time the weekend came rolling around, Gabo was still stuck right where he had been. He was still staying at Cornelius's place and following his ever more dubious lead, following him to the union hall each day before making what would prove to be the biggest mistake of all when he decided to keep on following as the weekend came around. When he followed along as Cornelius went off to spend those days hitting the casinos in a certain town in Nevada, blowing part of his slender bankroll on a trip that he really couldn't afford, and this to a place that held no interest for him since he never gambled.

So it was a bad decision that he made to go to Nevada that day. A bad move which came at the very end of what had been such a bad decade for seamen: The nineteen-eighties which were finally drawing to a close as Gabo made his ill-fated trip, only months remaining in the final year of that dissolute, decadent decade.

That decade which had done so much harm not only to the lives of seamen, but to the future of the entire country as well, with the nation's turn toward "supply-side" and all the other nonsense which came to be known as "Reaganomics" slowly eating away at the very foundations of the widespread prosperity which the country had been enjoying over the previous thirty-something years. The country digging itself ever deeper into debt for the sake of short-term and often ephemeral gains. And though that phantasm known as the "economy-as-a-whole" may have been chugging along just fine in the closing months of the decade, the bill for all those years of greed and corruption and deficit spending was growing by the day. Getting ready to come due—or more correctly, it was getting ready to be postponed for the first of what would prove to be many times over the coming decades as politicians and economists discovered the glories of unlimited deficits. Of borrowing even more money each time that the "economy-as-a-whole" began to go sour. And whether they chose to do so through the conservative, "Reaganist" method of tax cuts or through the "Keynesian" method of increased spending, the end result was

always the same: more deficits. And a perpetuation of the illusion under which we were living, whether consciously or not, that we could somehow borrow our way to prosperity.

There was also a bright side to what was happening at the time, however, since those were the months during which the country was winning the Cold War at last, the Warsaw Pact coming unraveled so quickly that the fall of the Berlin Wall lay only weeks in the future as Gabo made his journey. That moment which would soon become the symbol of America's great victory. Of Reagan's victory, in fact, even though he was no longer in office when the wall actually fell. Because it was he who had set the nation on the path to victory, he who won that war at long last, just as his admirers are always so quick to claim. Though as generally seems to be the case with those people, their explanations of the hows and the whys of that victory are nearly the exact opposite of what actually happened, since in truth Reagan won that war almost in spite of himself. In spite of his original intentions.

Because the reignited arms race of his early years in office which his supporters love to cite as the key to victory? That had nothing to do with it. How could it when the race was almost completely one-sided? The United States mortgaging its future to pay for the buildup while the Soviets did virtually nothing but talk and complain, actually increased their military spending at a slower rate than what they had been doing previously as they sank steadily into the Afghan quagmire, the Reagan bluster little more than background noise. No! The real strategy through which Reagan won the Cold War was by making friends with Gorbachev. It was by removing our nation's external threat to the Soviet Union rather than by increasing it as he had done during the early years of his presidency. Removing that threat all at once and thereby knocking out what had been the main support of the Soviet system during its later years, the excuse which its leaders had always been able to offer their people whenever they tried to explain away the system's many failings. Because with that outside threat—that pillar of support—suddenly gone, the Soviets found themselves with a chance to turn inward for the first time ever. A chance to try reforming their system. And to seal their own doom in the process since that system was so badly broken and so unworkable that it could never be repaired. It could only collapse under its own weight, as it quickly did. It could only fall to pieces as it came face to face with what had always been its greatest enemy of all: itself. Its own ineptitude, inefficiency.

Not that Gabo cared about any of those things, however, not at the time and not later. Not that he paid them any attention as he made his trip to Nevada that fall, all that stuff going in one ear and right out the other. Politics, economics. Because the only thing that mattered to him at that moment was the here-and-now, and especially the problem of getting himself a ship and getting back home. Getting away from the nightmare which his life had so recently fallen into. And if the only way for him to do so was by following Cornelius to wherever he went, then that was what he would have to do.

Follow along as his leader got onto a bus that Saturday morning and started out for Nevada, Cornelius talkative and happy as the journey began. But then as the minutes and miles rolled by, the guy gradually became quieter and more pensive, with a strange, faraway look starting to appear in his eyes. A look of distraction which grew so intense as their destination drew nearer that finally he seemed hardly aware of Gabo's presence at all. Even his movements faster and more agitated, and he said not a word during the entire second half of the trip. Not a sound of any type as the bus pulled into the station at last, not a gesture to the man seated beside

him as he jumped up and went scurrying off in the direction of the nearest casino. Not even a look back to see if he was being followed.

And then no sooner had Cornelius entered the first casino he came to than he began to pump coins into the slot machines. Quarters, nickels, dimes, whatever he could find in his pockets. Going up to the cashier for more change once his supply was gone and then proceeding to stuff those newly acquired coins into the machines one after the other as he burned his way through his money like one possessed.

And during the whole time that this was happening, Gabo could do nothing but stare in disbelief at the man he had followed all the way there, the man he was counting on to get him back home again, but a man who seemed to have been converted into a monster all at once. A man so obsessed with his gambling that he was unaware of everything else that was going on around him. Unable to see the younger companion who stood by his shoulder and unable to hear the voice that spoke into his ear, reminding him of the need to get a room or to eat or to do something else. Anything else besides gambling away all his money in the first few hours of their stay.

Because Cornelius seemed to have gone deaf and blind to everything but those slot machines as he went on tossing his money away, and he didn't pause for food or alcohol or even a bathroom break. Not once as the afternoon wore on into evening. He just squandered his hard-earned money one coin at a time. And it wasn't until sometime after darkness had fallen outside that he suddenly turned and walked out the door without a word, down the street to a bigger, fancier casino that lay some distance away in the middle of the strip. A whole new palace of pleasure where he walked in and bought a big tray full of chips which he carried over to one of the craps tables, sat down there and then proceeded to throw those chips away as quickly as he could. Betting foolishly on hunches or something of the sort while the contents of the tray dwindled steadily. And while Gabo looked on in a state of shock.

What had he gotten himself into? he wanted to know. The guy he was counting on to pay for a room that night throwing his money away like an idiot, like a madman. Throwing away every last penny that Gabo would be needing for food and shelter, both here and back on the coast. Because what would become of him once Cornelius ran out of money altogether? Where would he stay then? Where would he go and what could he...?

All at once, Cornelius turned to look at him with an expression on his face that sent a chill running through Gabo's body. Glancing up from the nearly-empty chip tray with a predatory look in his eyes as though in search of fresh meat, of some new source of funds with which to replenish that tray as the last of his own money threatened to disappear at any moment. And no sooner had Gabo seen that look than he knew that he had to get out of there. He had to get out now! Because he couldn't throw away what little money he still had left, not when he was so far from home. Far from the ship he needed or even the port at which he was registered. So he had to get away before it was too late. He had to flee into the night with no plan and no leader, nothing but his desperate will to survive.

Out onto the neon-lit sidewalk, he practically ran. Down the street after a quick glance back to make sure that he wasn't being pursued, and then on until finally he came to a halt at a

big intersection with casinos on every corner. Flashing lights and people strolling the night, alone or in pairs or groups, some of them drunk and some just happy as they went from one brightly lit doorway to another. Everyone having a good time, it seemed. Everyone but Gabo who stood as though frozen in that spot, more hesitant than ever before in his life. More lost, more indecisive. More in need of a leader.

Where should I go? he asked himself. What should I do? Should I use some of my money to catch a bus back to the coast? Back to that... Back to where I have no place to stay and not even any work clothes since they're all locked up in Cornelius's place. Because all I've got with me is a few dollars and that toothbrush and the other little stuff in the pocket of this coat. So that without Cornelius around, I'd be screwed even worse back there on the coast than what I am around here. I'd be... Oh God, what should I do? What should I do?

The only thing Gabo knew for sure was that he had to find help right there where he was, in that very town. He had to latch onto somebody, some passer-by or some group, some... Or then again, it might be easier to approach someone who was stopped and standing in one spot, he told himself as he tried to think this thing through. Someone like... His eyes came to rest upon a woman who stood a half-block away, skimpy clothes and heavy make-up, while the man standing a short distance beyond her looked even worse. Like he must have been her pimp or something, so that there was nothing doing over there.

Looking around and checking the sidewalk directly across the street from where he was, Gabo's eyes were soon drawn to a big guy he saw standing over there. A white guy who stood in a casual, watching-the-world-go-by pose like he didn't have a care in the world. Stood in the way that a seaman does when he's between bars or cathouses, the posture so familiar that Gabo knew he had found his man from the first moment he saw him. That big guy who looked so open and approachable.

So what do I say first? he was questioning himself once again as he set out across the street. Running through a series of opening lines almost like he was on his way to pick up a girl. Should he come right out and ask for help in the way that he had with Cornelius? All that panic and begging, making himself into a victim right from the start. No, that was no good, because just look at where it had led him. So that now with this new guy, he knew that he should start off with something different, something casual and light-hearted like the way he would talk if he weren't in such trouble right then. He should start off with a joke.

"Hey, if you find a hundred-dollar bill laying around out here, it's mine," he repeated an old joke that he had heard some time back.

"A hundred? Oh sorry, only thing I found was a fifty," the big guy's tone was friendly.

"Oh, that's mine, too," Gabo shot back as the two of them began to laugh. He liked this guy already, he told himself. Liked him for real, it wasn't just the desperation talking. And he would have wanted to be friends with him in any case, so natural and unaffected. "So you from around here?"

"Here? No man, there's nobody from around here. We're all just passin' through."

“Yeah, that’s right, that’s right... So you come from California?”

“Nah, I just drove in from the other direction... But I’m on my way out there.”

Drove in? Did he just say that he had a car? Wow, this keeps getting better and better. “Oh yeah, where you going in California?”

“I don’t know exactly. I’m just goin’ out there to get me a ship is all...”

“A ship!? You’re a seaman!!? Wow man, me too. I’m a seaman, too!” Gabo was so wound up all at once that he couldn’t have held his emotions in check had he tried. “So we’re like brothers, huh? Me and you. Brotherhood of the sea.”

“Yeah, brother,” the big guy’s tone was only half-mocking.

“So what you doing around here? Where you going?” The questions were suddenly pouring from Gabo’s mouth so quickly that he didn’t leave time for his new friend and brother to answer. He just let everything out, all the pent-up emotions of the horrible days he had just been through. All the tidal wave of relief that he felt at that moment. “What port you going to? Where you registered? Where you been shipping out of?”

As the torrent of questions began to ease off slightly with time, the big guy finally began to answer them. A few of them anyway. He told about being registered at a port on the Gulf of Mexico, though he said that he had never actually shipped out of there, his card having rolled over by that time in any case. So that now he was on his way to the West Coast to re-register there and start all over with a brand new shipping-card. Register at whatever port it ended up being since his plans along those lines were anything but clear. As though all he knew for sure was that he was heading for the West Coast, for some port or other on that coast.

Like maybe even the port at which Gabo was registered, the thought struck him all at once as visions of salvation flashed through his head. Visions of the two of them driving to the coast together, sharing a room in some hotel until a good job came up and Gabo grabbed it with his well-aged shipping-card. Oh, that would be so wonderful if he could just find a way to pull it off. A way to convince the guy that he should register and ship out of that port.

Gary, the guy said his name was. An old-guy name it seemed to Gabo, a lot older than what he looked since he didn’t have grey hair or wrinkles or anything, though still he must have been pretty old judging by the sea-stories he had to tell when the conversation evolved in that direction. Those old-guy stories about Vietnam and about freighters going to places where Gabo had never been, places where American ships hadn’t gone in years. So the guy had to be pretty old, like forty or something.

He was friendly enough, though, even if he was a bit on the quiet side. A whole lot quieter than what Gabo was being right then as his happy, outgoing Jojo side came to the fore, blabbing away and making jokes in the way that white guys usually expect Filipinos to do. And while he tried to watch himself a bit so as not to give too much away about his present circumstances, the other guy seemed almost as stingy with that sort of information, whether because he was dodging the questions or because he really didn’t know the answers.

“So how long you gonna be staying here?” Gabo asked at one point.

“I don’t know, man. I’m just kinda playin’ it by ear. I’m just like... I’m just watchin’ the circus, ya know.” He nodded toward a loud group of people passing by on the sidewalk as he spoke.

“So you’re not, uh...?” Gabo wasn’t sure how to bring up the subject of gambling after the horrendous experience he had just been through with Cornelius. He wasn’t even sure that he wanted to ask, fearing as he did the answer that he might receive.

“I don’t know, man. I’m not that much into gambling, so I just...”

“No?” What a relief!

“No, I just had to get outa that place where I was, is all. Cause like I couldn’t...” Gary paused briefly before going on in a somber, thoughtful tone. “I mean, a guy can only sell out for so long, ya know. Lettin’ people use him and shit... Cause after that, he’s gotta get real with himself. Ya know? He’s gotta get back to bein’ himself.”

“Yeah man, you’re right,” Gabo said in the way that he always did with Mates and other leaders. He went along with the guy even though he had no idea what he could be talking about.

The two of them stood together on that sidewalk for twenty minutes, thirty, talking and telling the occasional sea-story and getting to know each other as they watched the steady parade of people. The circus as Gary called it. Tourists and low-lives and high-roller wannabes and everyone else between. Some of them talking and laughing in loud, drunken voices while others passed by in silence. And then after a while, along came a group that did nothing but argue and yell and scream at each other.

And they were so loud and so bellicose as they came to a halt less than half a block away that Gary and Gabo had to stop their conversation and stare. That whole group of men who stood there shouting and shoving each other from time to time, fighting over some cause that was a mystery to their audience. There were a couple of big guys among them, one so drunk that he could barely stay on his feet, and there was an old guy who seemed like another of the main protagonists, while right in the middle of that sea of anger and hostility was a woman. And not just any woman either, but she had to be one of the hottest women that Gabo had ever seen in his life. Perfect body and gorgeous face, so that even if she wasn’t all dressed up right then, wearing nothing but pants and a plain, simple shirt, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, still she seemed to glow. Her beauty radiating out and half-obscuring the men who surrounded her.

“I told you I don’t know! I didn’t decide yet,” she shouted at one of the big guys, the aggressive one, not the drunk. “You just gonna have to wait.”

The guy yelled something back, though Gabo failed to catch it, his ears more attuned to the lady’s voice at that moment. That voice which... What type of accent did she have? Mexican or Spanish or something?

“No! Stop that!” she screamed as suddenly punches were being thrown. “Don’t do that!” she yelled fruitlessly as the aggressive guy went after the old guy—or perhaps it was the other way around—while the others squared off as well, three or four on each side. “Stop!!” as everything around her dissolved into chaos. Grunts and shouts and flying fists. Even the big drunk trying to get involved though he kept stumbling and falling down, missing with the wild punches that he flung about.

“Don’t do that!” the lady kept yelling. “Stop fighting!!” Standing her ground even as she was jostled about from time to time. Refusing to run away as she repeated her orders again and again, barked them out to no avail. “Stop fighting, all of you!”

“Hey man, we gotta do somethin’,” Gary said all at once. “We gotta help her.”

“We what!?” Gabo blurted out. Get involved in that? Man, you gotta be kidding, cause I’m a lover, not a fighter.

“Come on!” Gary was already on his way as he said it, striding along with an air of determination in his step that seemed completely out of character with the way he had just been talking and acting. He was heading straight for trouble and leaving Gabo with no choice but to trail along behind, a step or two back so as to keep that big body between himself and any of the combatants.

“Come on now, break it up!” the big man ordered as he arrived at the edge of the battle zone. “You guys stop that!!”

“Fuck you!” the aggressive guy shouted back, not ready to put an end to a fight he was winning, evidently. Because the big drunk was completely out of it by that time, sprawled out on the sidewalk, while the old guy and his friends seemed to be on their last legs, just barely holding on. “You stay the fuck outa this. It’s a private fight.”

Gary froze at the sound of those hostile words as though unsure how to proceed. Not answering them and not taking action but just looking around at the various fighters and the lady. Especially the lady.

“Help,” she said all at once in a quiet, pleading voice as she looked straight at Gary. “Help me.”

And then no sooner had those words been uttered than suddenly Gabo’s shield was gone, the big man wading into the middle of the action fists-first. One-two and the aggressive guy was on the ground. Another quick right and so was his friend, while everyone else scattered to get out of the way, turning back after a few steps to see what was going to happen next. To watch as the aggressive guy started to get back up, rolled over and rose up onto hands and knees where he paused for a moment. Like he wasn’t quite sure that he wanted to go another round with that big, tough guy who stood above him.

And his indecision only came to an end when Gary reached out with his hand in a gesture of peace, reached out to help him to his feet. “No hard feelin’s, huh?” the big man said in a calm, soothing voice. “Just no more fightin’, okay?”

Gabo could hardly believe what he had just witnessed, his big friend having made such short work of that whole group of men. And perhaps even more remarkable was Gary's reaction now that peace had been restored. His quiet humility as he shook a few hands and sent the former foes off in opposite directions, with only a couple of them remaining behind to revive the big drunk, his bumbling bashfulness before the gaze of that beautiful lady. Looking everywhere but in her direction as she stood and waited for him, even made a gesture or two with her head though without effect, until finally she was forced to come right out and say it aloud. "Come over here, please," she said in a sweet, inviting tone as she moved off a short distance toward a spot where the two of them could converse in private.

Where she could steal that man from him! Gabo realized all at once as he watched the big man go walking off. That man he needed to get him out of the terrible mess he was in. Gone just like that! Though what else could he do right then besides watch? Because a Filipino seaman like him matched up against a Spanish beauty like her in a competition for the guy's attention? What chance did he have?

And so despite the fact that he had so much riding on the outcome of the conversation taking place between those two people, still there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't even follow along to listen in. He could only watch from where he was and try to read their gestures, the blatant come-on from the lady and the... What was happening on Gary's part? Those dodgy glances and that shyness, the guy almost hanging his head in shame or uncertainty. Like he was intimidated by the woman speaking to him.

And Gabo continued to watch until finally the lady gave one last smile and then reached out and handed something—or several things—to the big guy before turning to walk away. Much to his relief as Gary soon came back over to where he waited, wearing the goofiest expression on that big face of his and smiling like some love-struck teenager.

"So what did she...?" Gabo had to know, he just had to. "What was that...?"

"Man, she sure is somethin', isn't she?" were the first words from Gary's mouth.

"Yeah, but what did she...?"

"Ya think she's good lookin'?"

"Good looking? Shit man, she's a knockout." Oops! Gabo said to himself as he heard his own spontaneous reaction. What am I doing playing her up like that when I should be...? You know.

"Yeah, a knockout. That's the word for it," Gary said as that stupid smile grew even bigger on his face, his eyes losing focus as though fading off into a dream about her.

"So what did she say? What did she tell you?" Gabo could hold it in no longer. "What did she want?"

"Oh that? She was like... You know, she said thanks and stuff like that, and then she... Well, she went and asked me if I wanted a job."

“A job!? What you talking about, man? You’re a seaman. You don’t do that shit.”

“Yeah, but it’s kinda like a seaman’s job in a way, cause it’s at this port where she works. Her and all those guys she was with. They all work at the same terminal.”

“The same...?”

“Same terminal. You know, like where they load the ships and all that. Doin’ shore-side work.”

“But where?” The question popped into Gabo’s head. The most important question of all right then. “Where’s this terminal? What port?”

“Oh, it’s in ____.” Gary gave him the bad news in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone. Naming a port city that was not only different from the one at which Gabo was registered, but in fact one that wasn’t in California at all.

“What...?” Gabo was practically speechless at the sound of that name. Until suddenly a new thought struck him. “And you say you wanta go working with them!? All those people fighting all the time? Man, that’s gotta be crazy. That’s like... That’s gonna be a real hell-ship, man. A real hell-ship. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah...? I don’t know... Maybe you’re right...” Gary sounded like the words must have struck a chord as even that stupid look on his face started to fade.

“Of course I’m right.” Gabo began to press the issue, encouraged by his apparent success. “Course I’m right. Cause like that fight today? Man, that shit’s gonna be happening every day if you go there. Every single day. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine how bad it’s gonna be? Fighting every day.”

On and on he went with those and similar phrases until at last he drew a response of sorts. “Yeah, well... All I told her was that I’d think about it. That’s all,” Gary said weakly.

“Yeah, that’s right. You can think about it, that’s all you gotta do.” Though don’t think too hard, he added in silence.

“Hey, if you wanta know a really good port to ship out of, I can tell you what cause I know. I been there,” Gabo soon went on, naming the port at which he was registered and then singing its praises. A somewhat exaggerated version of its praises. “Oh yeah, it’s the best port on the whole coast. Lotsa jobs and good paying jobs, too. None-a those sweetheart contracts around there cause it’s all full-contract. And you can get out on a brand new card if you want to. No problem with that, man. Cause it’s easy.”

As Gary listened, he did so passively, giving no indication that he was ready to commit himself one way or the other just yet. Answering Gabo’s sales pitch with more grunts and, “Oh yeah,” than anything else. The new version of his earlier, “I’ll think about it.” And then as Gabo began to run out of steam, suddenly the big guy changed the subject on him completely. “Hey d’ya already have a place to stay tonight?”

“A place? No, not yet...”

“Well, I tell ya what. That uh... The lady back there went and gave me this voucher for a couple-a nights at one-a the best hotels in town. And it’s for two people, so if ya wanta share a room...”

Share a room? Of course he wanted to! That was exactly what he had been looking for all along. So that the only problem Gabo faced right then was to hold back his enthusiasm as he answered. To hide some of the elation he felt at that moment. “Yeah, that’s a great idea, partner. Great idea!”

His partner, his brother-of-the-sea. This man with whom he would be sharing a room over the next few days, perhaps even weeks if he could find some way to talk the guy into it. The two of them together forever, or at least for a little while. Until Gabo managed to get himself a ship. Through thick and thin. For... For... What is it that they say when people get married? For better or for worse.

FOR BETTER

“Do you want separate beds?” the lady at the counter asked as the two men checked into the hotel.

“Yeah, please,” Gary answered in that deep, mild voice of his.

“Of course we do. What you think?” Gabo added, not sure whether to be offended or simply amused.

“I don’t think anything, sir,” the lady responded with cold correctness. “It’s just a question we always ask.”

“Well me and him, we don’t swing that way.”

“Any luggage?” the lady went on as though she hadn’t heard that last.

“No, not uh... Not right now. We’ll get it later,” Gary answered for the two of them while Gabo just stared at her.

“Yes, of course you will,” came the quietly sarcastic reply as the lady turned her attention back toward the computer on the counter before her. And then after a minute or two, she handed over a pair of keys with a mechanical smile and an, “Enjoy your stay.”

“Thanks, we will,” said Gary as the two of them started off in the direction of the elevator without another word.

Not until Gabo began to unload once they were out of ear-shot of the front desk. “Man, you believe that? She thinks we’re a couple-a fruits. Me and you.”

“Does she?” the big guy sounded unconcerned.

“Yeah man, didn’t you hear her? Ask us if we want separate beds. That’s what you ask a guy and a girl, not a couple-a guys... Unless you figure they’re fruits.”

“Yeah...?”

“So what’s she thinking? What’s she...?”

As Gabo peered up at the man beside him, so much bigger that he barely reached mid-chest, he looked for some sign to guide him and tell him how he should be reacting, whether with anger or humor or what. But then as he saw nothing on the other man’s face but a look of calm indifference, he found himself completely without direction. With nothing to do but to probe. “Man, she’s gotta be crazy. Cause look at us. You so big and me so small...” What’s that expression? Is it a smile? Is he...? “Cause you gonna squash me, man. You’re too big for me. Little guy like me...” Yes, it’s a smile all right. It sure is. “I can’t do it with you even if you’re a girl. Cause you’re too big. I don’t reach...”

“A girl? Shit man, I bet ya never met one as big as me,” Gary said with a half-laugh.

“No, you’re right about that. You’re right,” Gabo went on in a more confident tone, sure by now that he was on the right track. “But hey, how bout you? You like small girls? Little Pilipina girls? You like em...?”

“Man, I like em any way I can get em, long as they’re pretty.”

“And long as they’re real girls, huh? None-a those Benny-boys...”

“Yeah, that’s right. Real girls only,” the guy said with a more pronounced laugh before suddenly he switched gears. “Hey man, I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready to go to bed just yet. It’s way too early for that. And besides, I got this... this lucky poker chip that I figure maybe we oughta go and try it out.”

“Lucky poker chip...?”

“Yeah, that’s what she said it was anyway. That, uh... That pretty lady back there. She told me it was gonna be a lucky one when she gave it to me. Said we can’t lose.”

“Can’t lose?” Gabo didn’t like the sound of those words, reminding him as they did of the way his previous leader had spoken back at the beginning. On the way to the bus...

“But it’s just gonna be a one-shot deal, okay? Cause that’s as long as real luck ever holds out. Just one shot, and that’s it. We get up and walk away. Win or lose.”

“I don’t know, cause gambling...”

“And I tell ya what, half-a whatever we make is yours cause-a the way ya helped me out in that fight back there. So however much money we win, half of it’s yours.”

“The way I...?” Did what? Gabo wondered. Helped with the fight? Me!? Helped? How did I...? And what’s that other thing he said just now about giving me money? Giving it for free! “Yeah, well I... You know, I thought maybe you need help...”

“So like I say, whatever we win with this lucky chip, you get half of it. Fifty-fifty. And we just gotta... Ya know, if we really wanta make some money on a one-shot deal like this, what we gotta do is we gotta play a number on roulette. Just pick out a number and then, wham! We got ourselves a big payoff. Thirty-somethin’ to one if we hit it.”

A big payoff? Gabo had always been afraid of gambling, but there was something he liked about those words. And besides, if he wasn’t going to be risking any of his own money, could it even be called gambling? he wondered. Because wasn’t it only gambling when you bet your own money?

As the two of them walked from the hotel lobby through the door to the adjoining casino, Gary began to ask his little friend about lucky numbers. Did Gabo have one? And what did he think about this number or that one? Was thirteen too obvious? Twenty-seven too obscure? And what about seven? Or four? Until all at once he asked, “Hey, what’d ya say she was, anyway? Somethin’ like thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six? Is that what ya figure?”

“Yeah, I guess. That sounds about right...”

“So okay, that’s it! That’s gotta be the lucky number. Thirty-six. So that’s what we gotta play. Thirty-six.”

“You think so? You really think...?”

“And it’s only this one time that we’re gonna play it, like I said. We’re gonna make this one bet and that’s it. We hit the number, and we cash in the chips, or else we lose and we... Nah, forget about that cause we can’t lose.”

Turning to look around the room at the various roulette tables scattered about, Gary mumbled, “Let’s see now,” or something of the sort, before suddenly pointing at one of them and saying, “That’s it. I know it is, I can feel it in my guts. That’s the lucky table over there.” And then after a short walk, soon he was reaching out with the chip in his hand and setting it down with an air of conviction. The lucky chip on the lucky number on the lucky table. The magic combination that couldn’t lose. Couldn’t possibly lose.

Come on, Gabo pleaded in silence as he watched the wheel spin around and around, the little ball spinning in the opposite direction, and the adrenaline suddenly surging through his veins. Come on thirty-six. Come on... Thirty-six!! He had to blink his eyes and look again as he saw the ball drop into the slot. “We won, man. We won!”

And he could hardly contain himself as he watched the croupier make a big stack of chips and slide it over to where they stood. So much money all at once, and it was all his. Half of it anyway. And for nothing! For doing absolutely nothing, no work or anything. For just standing there and letting it come his way.

Hey you know, this gambling isn't so bad after all, Gabo said to himself as he looked down at those chips, those beautiful little chips. And he felt like a little boy inside as he thought about all the things he could buy with that money. A little boy who had suddenly discovered that his parents' warnings had been wrong. Because the sky hadn't fallen in just now and lightning hadn't struck, and in fact, there wasn't a single bad thing that he could see in what had happened. Not one. Nothing but those chips, all that money which was now his.

"So what we gonna play next? What's the next lucky number?" he asked as Gary divided the chips into two equal stacks. "What we gonna bet on next?"

"Nothin' man, I already told ya that," the big man said calmly, quietly. "This was a one-shot deal. Don't ya remember? One number and one bet."

"One number? Man, that's crazy, cause look at what we just won," the words came leaping out in the heat of the moment, the heat of his discovery about the realities of gambling. Because look at all that money! Gabo went on to himself. Look at how much we just won. And we can keep on making it, too, if you'll just pick out more lucky numbers.

"Well I tell ya what, man. This money right here's yours," Gary said as he pointed at one of the stacks. "So you can do whatever ya want with it. Ya can go ahead and give it back to the house playin' them long odds if ya want to. But me, I'm gonna go cash-in... Fact, I think I might even use this money we just won to go out and get me somethin' to eat."

"Eat...?" Who could think about food at a time like this? With the money rolling in the way it was. Who could even think about eating? Gabo wondered as he looked down at his sudden wealth. That big stack of chips that was his, all his.

And as he stuck out a hand and began to play with those lovely plastic disks, he soon heard that deep, gentle voice speak to him once again. "I tell ya what, man. If ya wanta keep on playin', I'd recommend that ya don't go doin' any more-a that lucky number shit like what we just did, cause if ya do that you're gonna lose everything ya got. So what ya should be doin' instead is ya should be playin' short odds."

"Huh...?"

"Yeah, you know, like where ya play stuff that gives ya even odds. And then if ya wanta play it even safer, ya can go doublin' your bet every time ya lose, or somethin' like that. Cause if ya do it that way, ya can make your money slow-but-sure, a little bit at a time. Long as the house'll let ya do it, that is, and long as ya got enough money to keep coverin' the bets when ya get onto a losin' streak."

"What's that you say? Doubling my bets? I never hearda that." Or anything else you've just been talking about, either. Short odds, even odds...

As Gary went into a brief explanation of the procedure, Gabo sat fingering his chips, trying to take in what he could while his mind wandered off into visions of bigger and bigger stacks of chips. Hundreds of dollars. Thousands. Maybe even millions.

“So it’s up to you, man,” the big guy said in conclusion. “But me, I’m gettin’ hungry, and I wanta go get me somethin’ to eat. And I mean somethin’ good. So you can do whatever ya want right now. Ya can come along with me or ya can stay.”

“Eat...?” Gabo said once again, though this time as he said it, he became aware all at once of the churning which had been taking place in his stomach ever since the first mention of that word. His body reminding him in its unsubtle way of the fact that he hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast, and that his hunger for food at that moment was even greater than his hunger for wealth. “Yeah, let’s eat,” he said as he got up and began to stuff the chips into his pockets. “Let’s go get something good.”

Steak and lobster and baked potatoes, the two of them were soon putting away in a big, fancy restaurant they discovered a few blocks away, Gabo paying for his share of the meal out of the sparse funds he carried with him since he hadn’t wanted to cash in any of his chips back at the casino like what Gary had done. Those lucky chips, each and every one of them. Those chips which were the beginning of his good fortune. His lucky streak. Oh, he could feel it down inside each time he stuck his hand into his pocket and fondled those beautiful little pieces of plastic money. Those little...

“Hey man, ya wanta really cap this night off right?” Gary asked as the two of them were on their way back to the hotel. “Ya wanta go score some weed? Cause man, it’s been a long time since I had any.”

“Weed? You mean drugs!?” Gabo’s happy, contented feeling was gone in a flash at the sound of that word. Because drugs!! That was serious stuff. That wasn’t like... It was way worse than gambling, a whole lot worse. “No. I don’t do that stuff. Not drugs!”

“Oh, ya don’t? Hey, sorry man,” Gary shot back as though startled at the heat of his friend’s reaction.

“No, cause that stuff’s against the law, you know. And if you ever get caught, your career is over, man. That’s it. You’re finished.”

“Sorry...” Gary mumbled.

While Gabo went on with his anti-drug harangue. “That stuff’s not good for you, and if you ever get caught... You know they’re gonna start testing people for drugs one-a these days. Did you ever hear about that? They say they’re gonna test you before you can even ship out. So if you’re using drugs, that’s it. You never go to sea again. Never.”

“Yeah, like I say, I’m sorry, man,” Gary said in a more forceful tone. “Sorry I brought it up. And I tell ya what, I won’t ever talk about it again. Okay?”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that,” Gabo said with relief. “Cause man, you go doing that stuff and you get us both in trouble. Me, too.”

“Okay, I won’t mention it again.”

“And you won’t go buying drugs or using them or anything, will you? Cause you get me in trouble, too, you know,” Gabo pleaded with his big, misguided partner. His errant leader. Please, he said with his eyes and his gestures. Please don’t do that to me. To me!!

“Ya mean even by myself...?” Gary sounded flustered at the proposal.

“No, please!”

“Jesus...” Gary was back to mumbling now as his eyes darted all about, from the neon signs above them to the sidewalk below to the cars passing by in the street, and occasionally to those big puppy-dog eyes that looked at him imploringly. “I don’t know, man. I just...”

“Please,” Gabo said it aloud once again.

“Okay, I tell ya what. I won’t go gettin’ ya into trouble. Okay? I won’t ever... I won’t get ya into any trouble.”

Good, said Gabo to himself as the two of them resumed their stroll back to the hotel. Happy in the knowledge that everything was going to be fine after all, with no drugs and with a first-class hotel to stay in for the next few nights. And that’s not to mention all those lucky chips which he had in his pocket right then, just sitting there ready to multiply. Ready to start breeding like they were a bunch of plastic rabbits or something. Making more chips and more chips and more, until before long he would be...

“Hey, I forgot about the stuff I got in my car,” Gary said all at once as they arrived at the entrance to their hotel. “So I gotta go back and get it, okay? I gotta go... And I’ll see ya later up in the room, okay?”

“Yeah sure, that’s okay,” said Gabo before watching his big friend turn and walk away. “I’ll see you later... Partner!”

And meanwhile, I’ll just go up and wait for you in the... Or wait a minute. What’s the big hurry about going up to that room? Gabo asked himself as his eyes fell upon the doors to the casino that adjoined the hotel lobby. Why should I go up there when I’m not even sleepy? Why shouldn’t I just... you know, go in there and try out that...? What did he call it? That double bet or double something...

As Gabo made his way to the roulette table at which he had won so much money an hour earlier, he searched his brain for the details of the system that his friend had told him about. That... So let’s see now, what was it? he asked himself. What did he say? Something about playing the evens or the colors or something like that, wasn’t it? Starting off with one chip and putting it on the evens or the... Evens? Wait a minute, that sounds like math, doesn’t it? And I hate math. So I’ll just play the colors instead, cause there’s no math in colors. I’ll just put one of these chips on the... Black. Because that’s always been my lucky color. So I’ll just put it... Okay, black. Here we go. You’re my color now. You’re the one I need. So come on black. Come on black. Come on... Eleven! Black!! I win, right? I win!

And Gabo felt a thrill run through him as he watched another chip appear beside the one he had just bet. A chip that was all his own this time. No one to share it with, so that he was now a whole chip richer. One whole chip! And it was only as he got ready to place his next bet that his self-interrogation resumed, asking himself in silence, So what do I do now? Do I double the bet when I...? No, it's when I lose that I do that, right? That's when I double it. So when I win, all I do is play one chip again. Right? Isn't that what he said? Isn't that...? Oh man, I sure wish I'd paid more attention.

One chip he finally ended up betting. One which turned out to be another winner just like what the first one had been, so that it wasn't until the third spin of the wheel that Gabo found himself losing for the first time. Watching as one of his chips was swept away just like that. Gone! Completely gone. A sudden sick feeling rising up in the pit of his stomach as his hand reached out automatically to protect the remaining chips, and as his mind raced to recall more of the instructions.

Okay, calm down and think, he said to himself. Calm down and... So what did he say exactly? Something about doubling my bet every time I lose, right? That's what it was, I'm sure of it. So that means I've gotta double my bet right now. I've gotta... Let's see, double it means that you two-times it, right? Isn't that what it means? You go and two times... What? Two times... One, right? Cause that's what I bet before. So I just go and two times one, which makes two. Of course it does. Anybody knows that. Even someone who slept through his math classes back at school... So okay, here we go. Two chips on the black, cause I'm sticking with my lucky color. So two chips on the... Oh, come on black. Please. Cause I don't want to lose any more of my chips. So come on black, you've gotta do it for me. You've gotta... Twenty-eight, that's a black! It's a black! I win!!

What a relief, he said as two new chips were shoved over by the croupier to join the two which he had just bet. Two to make up for the one he had just lost, so that now he was... Let's see, how much richer was he? One plus one plus these two he just won, which makes... Ah, forget about all that math. Who wants to do stuff like that when he doesn't have to? When he's just sitting here having fun and making money doing it. Not working or anything like that. Just playing a game and letting the money come rolling his way. All that free money!

As Gabo went on playing after that, his stack of chips gradually grew larger, though it suddenly shrank rather drastically on a few occasions when he got onto losing streaks. His chips disappearing while his rusty math skills were put to the test in a way that they hadn't been in years. Saying to himself, Let's see, two times two makes four, and four times two makes... What? Eight, right? It makes eight. And then eight times two makes... Man, I hate this stuff. Cause where is Joji when I need him? Joji who was always so good at math that he could tell you stuff like that right off the top of his head. He could tell you that eight times two makes... Ah forget about it. I'll just... I'll hope that I don't ever have to go that high.

Hope that the inevitable would never occur, as unfortunately it did after he had been playing for half-an-hour, an hour. The moment arriving when he got onto a losing streak so long that it took him to an eight chip bet only to lose again, and to leave him facing the dreaded two times eight. Two times... Two stacks of eight chips, he soon decided since it was so much easier to do it that way than what it would be to do the math. Three stacks of eight if he were to lose

this one. Three stacks of... Oh God! Seven. That's red!! he screamed inside as he watched those two stacks being swept away. All that good money gone just like that. And me with... What? With another double? With three stacks this time!? Oh man, what type of system is this? And what's that guy getting me into? Three stacks of... Or wait a minute, do I even have that many? Do I even...? But you know I've gotta do it, cause if I don't, then everything else will be gone forever. So I've got no choice. I've gotta do it. I've got to!

"Oh God, please dear God," Gabo mumbled aloud as he watched the wheel and the ball spin around. "Please, oh please..." Seventeen. Black! "Thank you," he said in a louder tone as his eyes shot skyward. "Thank you. Thank you." And then as piles of chips appeared on the table before him, he knew that he was finished for the night. Finished forever!

Because God had spoken to him just now, he was sure that He had. "That's enough gambling for you," he could practically hear the words coming down from the sky. "So take your money and go. And don't ever do this again."

Yes Sir, Gabo said back in silence as he stuffed poker chips into his pockets, a lot more chips than what he'd had when he first came in. I'll never do it again, Sir. I promise that I won't. I promise.

Entering the hotel room a short time later, Gabo found to his surprise that his partner still hadn't made it back. Found that he was alone in that big, fancy room. With nothing to do but to pick out a bed and stretch out on it, grab the remote and start flipping through channels until the guy came. And he had been lying there on that soft, comfortable bed through a half-hour of programming, then a second, when he finally heard a key at the door. Saw it swing open as Gary made his entrance, the big man walking into the room with nothing in his hands, no bag of any description and a sort of dazed expression on his face.

"Hey man, how's it goin'?" he said as he closed the door behind him and looked around. "Pretty nice place, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty nice."

"So, uh... Is that your bed?"

"Yes, if it's okay..." Gabo answered. And then as the big man stood where he was with his eyes wandering about as though unable to make up his mind what to do next, Gabo got right to the point. "So where's your bag?"

"My bag? Oh shit man, I forgot all about it."

Forgot about it? How could he have forgotten about it when that was the whole reason he went to his car?

The next morning Gary remembered about his bag, so that after putting away a good-sized breakfast at the hotel, he led the way over to where his car was parked. His wreck of a car, Gabo thought as he looked the thing over. Because it was probably older than he was himself.

And the condition? It was so bad that he just hoped the cops wouldn't come along and tow it away as an abandoned wreck.

When it came to gear, all the guy had was a little homemade seabag which he pulled out of the trunk and tossed onto his shoulder like it weighed nothing. "So how bout you? Ya got any luggage stashed away anywhere?" he asked. To which Gabo had to say no, though he sure would like to get some new clothes if they could find anyplace open on a Sunday morning. Something to replace the old ones whose reek hung in his nostrils, the stink of all that sweat from the night before when he had bet two chips and four chips and eight chips. Because what nerves he had suffered that night! What nerves!

And so it wasn't many minutes later that Gabo was pulling out some of his fast-shrinking supply of cash to pay for those clothes, telling himself not to worry since he could always replace it by cashing in the chips that bulged in his pockets. Those chips which God had told him to... Or wait a minute. What exactly had God said to him the night before? Had He actually said to stop gambling forever? Had that been it? No, somehow that didn't seem right. Because if that was what He had been saying, then He would have taken everything away. Right? He wouldn't have left Gabo with all those chips he still had, would He? More of them than what he started out with. So that couldn't have been the message. No way. It had to have been something else instead. Something about quitting for then, for right then, and about not getting too greedy. Right? Something like that. But it couldn't have been about quitting forever. Or else why would God have allowed him to come out a winner?

Soon after their return to the hotel room, Gary brought up the subject of future plans. "Ya plannin' on goin' back today so ya can be in the hall Monday mornin'?" he asked.

"Back...?" Back to where? Gabo asked himself. Where? "No, not today..."

"No? Well, that voucher's good for three nights, and I'm figurin' on bein' here for all three of em, and maybe even more. I don't know yet. I might..." The big guy's voice faded into thought. "You're welcome to stay with me as long as ya want," he added at last.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks," Gabo replied in as casual a voice as he could. Of course he wanted to stay. Because what else could he do?

As Gary went on after that to the subject of their plans for the day, he sounded nothing like the resolute man who had broken up that fight the night before. Nothing like the one who had so recently led the way to his car, either. Because now as he began to discuss the many possibilities of a full day of leisure, he sounded as indecisive as anyone Gabo had ever known. Perhaps as indecisive as he was himself. "How bout a movie?" the guy asked him at one point. "Or maybe we could watch a football game at some sports bar," he said a short time later before mentioning the various shows that they had going on around there. "Did ya ever see one-a them? D'ya like any-a them groups they got playin'?"

"Anything is good," Gabo told him at last, "football or a movie."

"Or how bout both?" as the two of them did in the end. They drank beer and watched a football game in a bar that afternoon, and then as evening came on they caught a show at a movie

theater. And it was only after the movie was over, when Gary suggested that they go eat another big, fancy meal, that Gabo ever balked. Because the bar had been okay, Gary paying for all the rounds without having to be asked, and the movie hadn't done much to deplete his funds. But another big meal at an expensive restaurant? There was no way he could afford to pay for that. No way! Not with his bankroll as thin as it had become.

"And it's on me, okay?" Gary added after a brief pause, evidently having noticed the signs of distress on his friend's face.

"Yeah, sure man," Gabo muttered in reply. "I'll get the next one."

And with that, the two men established what was to become a pattern between them over the coming days. With Gary offering to pay for food and drinks and everything else, even buying his friend a few more changes of clothing, while Gabo would thank him each time for the "loan" which he promised to pay back. Spending almost none of his own tiny hoard of cash as he lived off his partner's benevolence over the two days that remained on the voucher, not to mention the days that followed since Gary decided to extend his stay at the hotel once the voucher had expired. He paid for enough nights to take them clear into the next weekend, saying as he did so that he still hadn't made up his mind about where he wanted to go next. And though Gabo made an effort at that point to help him decide upon a certain port in California where his own shipping-card had only weeks to go before it rolled over, Gary soon put an end to the discussion with a, "Ya know what? I might just end up flippin' a coin one-a these days. Cause man, I sure can't make up my mind."

And if Gary wasn't going to make up his mind and get on with his life, then how was Gabo to get on with his own? Too broke and helpless right then even to go in search of a new leader, so that he was stuck with the one he had. Stuck with that big guy who may have been a great shipmate, so generous and considerate, though he had to be one of the worst leaders ever. Completely incapable of making up his mind about anything, it seemed. And until he finally got around to doing so, there was nothing for Gabo to do but to wait. A prisoner in a luxurious, all-expenses-paid prison as he may have been, though a prisoner all the same. His fate in the hands of a man who showed so little in the way of initiative as he spent his days hanging out in town to no apparent purpose.

Gary would sit for hours in their hotel room, reading books while Gabo watched TV. And though he would go out for a walk each day around midday, a meal and perhaps an extended visit to the library or to one of the local parks, he would always return to the room afterwards. No more movies for him on those days as though his effort to keep his friend entertained on their first day together had been a one-time thing, and there were no visits to bars or casinos until sometime after dark, as instead the guy would spend those long, boring days with his books. Gabo spending them with the boob-tube since he had no desire to venture outside on his own, without someone along to guide him. Watching in silence most of the time since any attempts he made to liven things up seemed to fall flat. His size jokes, his separate bed jokes, they never elicited more than a wan smile from the big man. Never a laugh and never a joke in return.

Or at least not before evening came along. Not until after Gary had put down his book and headed for a local bar, bought a couple of rounds and poured them down. Because it was

only then that the quiet, thoughtful look on his face would ever disappear. The look of sadness, it seemed to Gabo at times, somewhere deep inside those eyes. A sadness so profound that it even came out in the tone of his voice sometimes. Reading one day in the local newspaper about some old-time rock band that was playing in town, a band from so long ago that Gabo had never even heard of it, and the big man shaking his head slowly as he looked at the paper, muttering something about, “Man, I can’t believe the way them guys’re on this oldies circuit out here, cause it doesn’t seem like that long ago. It just... I don’t know, man. I don’t know...”

That melancholy man would be gone as if by magic by the time Gary was on his second drink each night, however, a smiling, friendly shipmate emerging to take his place. A guy who was ready to answer a joke with a joke, ready to buy another round or to spring for a big meal for the two of them. As happy and contented as could be. And he would still be smiling even when he said a sudden goodbye each night sometime after the meal was over. Told Gabo that he had to go check on his car before heading off into the night alone, returning to the hotel room hours later with a spacey look on his face and sometimes the odor of marijuana on his clothes.

Rejoining that little friend of his who never said a word despite the obvious clues, nothing about the look and nothing about the smell, as instead Gabo would pretend not to notice. Pretend in the same way that he pretended to be bored each time that Gary stopped off to play a little blackjack before making his trip to the car. Acting like he had no interest in gambling as he waited for his big friend to get tired and leave so that he could get back to his own lucky casino and his lucky roulette table, back to that place where he could add to his pile of poker chips.

Because whatever God may have been telling him on the first night in town, it was soon forgotten as Gabo went back to the casino on the very next night and the night after that. He played black on every spin, and he won chip after chip. And though he would sometimes get onto losing streaks, it didn’t take long for him to develop enough confidence in his system to know that sooner or later he was bound to win, so that there was no reason to let those streaks bother him in the way they had before. No reason to get nervous or excited as he simply had to raise his bets, go up to two stacks of eight chips, then three, then four. However many it took before he finally hit a winner and saw his treasure restored. Though as he watched his piles of chips grow night after night, he suspected at times that there might be something wrong with his system given the way that, while the bulk of chips in his pockets at the end of each day’s play should have been growing at a fairly steady rate, that didn’t seem to be the case. Not when on some days he would notice a significant new bulge while on others the supply hardly seemed to grow at all, perhaps even shrank a bit on the days of his longest and most frequent losing streaks.

Gabo never made an effort to figure out what exactly could be wrong, though, never even counted his chips to make sure that it was actually happening since he feared that God might not approve of such a thing. And instead he went on playing as before, with nothing to gauge his winnings but the amount of space that the chips took up in his pockets. His pants pockets which were soon bulging to capacity, followed shortly by his shirt pockets, so that by the third night he had to wear his coat when he played simply to have enough pockets to handle all the chips. All that plastic wealth which he never had to cash in since he had Gary there to pay for all the necessities: the room and the food along with everything else.

And he had accumulated so many chips by the time the week was over that he could have covered eight stacks of eight if he had needed to, ten stacks, maybe even fifteen. Enough chips to where he could have kept doubling his bets forever. Or at least so he thought the case to be until that final night in town, that Saturday night which was to be their last at the hotel since Gary had sworn that he was going to make his decision—or else flip a coin—by the next morning. Gabo was sure that he couldn't lose as he slowly added another chip and then another and another, and the only problem he foresaw was that of cashing-in at the end of the evening. Worried about the sense of loss that he would feel when it came time to exchange all those lucky chips, all those little plastic friends, for plain old folding-money. Regular old U.S. dollars.

But lose? That was impossible, he told himself. Until suddenly it began to happen. He got onto a losing streak that went on and on. Red after red after red while he dug more deeply than ever before into his reserves. Pulled out stack after stack of eight chips and bet them only to lose every time. The bulge in his pockets getting smaller and smaller and... Black! Finally!! he said to himself as the croupier shoved big piles of chips his way. That was close, cause if I hadn't won that one, I don't know if I could have covered another whole bet. Another whole... Wow, I sure am glad I won.

As Gabo raked the chips in and piled them up on the table before him, he noticed that his pulse was racing in a way that it hadn't done since the first night in town. It was racing and perhaps telling him that it was time to start listening to God once again. Time to cash in his chips and get out of there while the getting was still good. Though speak to him as the One above may have been trying to do, Gabo was much too jaded by then to let some little scare like that drive him out of the game. He had far too much confidence in his system.

And so he stayed at the table and continued to bet, winning chips slowly but surely and doubling his bet each time he lost. Winning and winning until suddenly he found himself on another long losing streak. Four chips and eight chips and two stacks of eight and three stacks and four. The chips vanishing quickly as his pulse began to race once again, with red number after red number coming up. And with the croupier relentlessly sweeping away those stacks of his.

Come on black! he said to himself again and again as the bad streak went on. Nothing about God since it was only the table and the wheel and the little ball to whom he spoke anymore. Come on black. Come on black... Red!? He couldn't believe it as another big pile of chips was lost. Because he had to hit a winner sooner or later. He just had to!

Before he knew it, though, he was digging through his pockets as deeply as before. More deeply. Searching with his fingers and pulling out every chip he could find and then stacking them up on the black. Stacking them up... Or wait a minute. Should he keep playing the black after all the times he had lost? Shouldn't he switch to the red? Shouldn't he...? Oh man, this was it. This was everything he had! The realization hit him with a jolt as his hands felt around in his now empty pockets. Nothing there and nothing left on the table in front of him as he had every chip he owned riding on the next spin. Everything he had to show for a week of gambling.

So come on black. Come on black. Please! You've gotta do it for me. You've gotta win! Cause this is it. This is all I've got! So come on black. Come on black. Come on... Zero!? That's not black!!

"Oh, God," the words came to his lips as he stared in stunned disbelief at the sight of his chips disappearing into the croupier's hoard. Every last one of them. His entire fortune! It was gone, all gone. "Oh, God," he said again as he struggled to stay upright. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

And it took some time, several more spins of the wheel, before the shock had worn off to the point where he was finally able to lift himself up from his stool and go staggering away from the table. Off to... He didn't where. Off to the room or off to start all over again, to change the few dollars he still had left for chips. Or maybe he was off to kill himself. He didn't know. His mind still too much of a blank to know where he should go or what he should do.

Gary! The name came to him in a flash. I've gotta go find Gary, cause he's got money. So this thing isn't over with yet. Not by a long shot, it isn't. Cause all I've gotta do is borrow some money from him, right? Enough to double my bet one more time and win it all back.

As he entered the room moments later, Gabo found that his friend—his savior now more than ever—hadn't made it back from "his car" yet. And so being much too anxious to sit around watching TV, he was soon on his way back down the elevator, off to wander the streets in a desperate search for the big man. To walk up one neon-lit sidewalk and down another while looking everywhere for that hulking figure, knowing that the guy had to be somewhere off in the distance. Somewhere over there or there or over there. Somewhere!

Nowhere! Gabo practically said it aloud as he gave up his search and turned back in the direction of the hotel at last. His chance to win his money back having slipped away, gone forever as he dragged himself along that lonely, crowded street. Disconsolate, defeated. And he was nearly numb with grief as he rode up the elevator, wallowing in self-pity as he inserted his key into the lock. As he swung the door open only to find that somehow Gary had gotten past him. "There you are!" he shouted in a burst of relief.

"Yeah, hi there..."

"You gotta help me, man! You gotta help!" Gabo couldn't possibly have contained himself at that moment. The joy he felt at the sight of his big friend, the end of despair and the renewal of hope. It was too much for any human being to have contained. And soon he was pouring out his heart to the big guy, bemoaning all the money he had lost and begging for help. Begging for a loan.

"So how much did ya lose? And how much do ya need?" Gary asked during a rare pause in his friend's appeal.

"A thousand, man. A thousand dollars!"

"A thousand? That's a whole shitload-a..."

"Or a hundred anyway. Five hundred. I don't know. Hundreds. I need hundreds."

“A hundred? Man, that’s still a lotta money, ya know. Specially considerin’ how much I been spendin’...”

“No, it’s not a lot. It’s what I need, man. It’s what I need!”

“Geez, I don’t know. Cause like I been payin’ for two people these days, ya know. So I don’t got...”

“You gotta give it to me. I need it!” Gabo didn’t want to hear any arguments, he just wanted the money. “You got it, don’t you? You got a hundred bucks?”

“Yeah, I guess. But like I say, I been payin’ for two people...”

“Well, what about credit cards?” the thought came to Gabo all at once. “You got a credit card, don’t you? Or checks. You got something like that, right?”

“No man, not me, cause I always live on cash,” Gary said with quiet firmness as he found the chance to finish one of his sentences at last.

“Cash...?” That word didn’t sound good to Gabo. The guy living off what he had in his pockets, with no fallback...

“Yeah, and like I tell ya, all I got left is about enough to take me out to the coast and then hang out in some cheap-ass place for a week or somethin’ till I can transfer the money I got in this old savings account back east. Cause like except for that account, this cash is the only thing I got, man. It’s every penny I got to my name.”

“So that’s it?” Gabo muttered before pausing to stare at the guy with a steady persistence. That’s all you’re gonna say? he asked himself as his mind raced ahead in search of convincing new arguments. “That’s all you’re gonna do after the way you talked me into this gambling stuff?” The words seemed to come to him from somewhere beyond. “The way you told me about your system. Told me I couldn’t lose!”

“Hey man, I never said that,” Gary sounded confused by the sudden accusation. “I never said ya couldn’t...”

“Oh yes, you did!” Gabo could hardly believe the aggressiveness in his own voice. “You told me I was sure to win. But look now! Look how I lost everything I got! And all you’re gonna say is you won’t help me.”

As Gabo pushed that line of reasoning with all the passion of a man who knew that his life hung in the balance, Gary seemed to cave in gradually. His counter-arguments soon giving way to apologies, saying that he was sorry for the way he had misled his friend. Sorry for everything, he said again and then again as those accusing words seemed to eat away at his resistance. At his inner resolve which appeared to grow weaker by the second, by the repetition of those phrases, those arguments. All that pressure, moral and psychological. Growing weaker, ever weaker, until suddenly the dam burst completely. “Okay, a hundred, right?” he said with a

heavy streak of resignation running through his tone. "A hundred bucks to win back your money."

"Make it two hundred!"

Soon the two of them were back in the casino, Gary going up to the cashier to buy a hundred forty dollars worth of chips which he handed over to Gabo. "Okay, good luck," he said as they started on their way toward the lucky roulette table. Good luck as Gabo piled all the chips onto the black despite the, "Ya sure about that? Ya sure ya wanta bet it all at once?" that was spoken into his ear.

"Of course I want to, cause that's the double your bet, right?" he said without turning his head. Of course he wanted to win his money back on a single spin of the wheel. Who wouldn't want to do it that way? Who wouldn't...?

Twenty-one! Red!! His eyes watched incredulously as all those fresh new chips were swept away. He had lost!? But how could that be? How could he have lost? How could his bad luck streak still be going on?

"I need more money!" he turned to his friend with a shout. "I gotta have more!" So desperate that he was ready to attack the guy in order to get what he needed. Ready to fight him and pull the money from his pockets by force. Ready to do anything.

"Man, I told ya not to..."

"Money! I need money!" Gabo was far beyond arguments by then. Beyond thought or reason. He was operating on pure gut instinct instead. Pure panic. "I need money. I gotta have money."

"Double what ya just lost? Shit man, I don't even got that much on me..."

"What you got? Cause I need it, man. You gotta give it to me!"

Begging and cajoling and begging some more as some of the other players at the table turned to watch the drama with curious looks or knowing smiles on their faces, even the croupier pausing momentarily. "I need more money, man. Cause you owe me." Gabo pleaded and implored as never before. Pleaded until finally he saw his big friend give in once again. Saw him pull out bill after bill, every twenty that he had, he said, along with some fives and even a few ones. Hand that whole wad over at the end with a quiet warning. "Man, ya lose this and we're really screwed, cause it's damn near everything I got left. It's like... About all I'm gonna have left after this is enough for a tank-a gas. Maybe."

"Oh, don't worry about that, cause we can't lose again." Hope and joy were surging through Gabo's body once again as he took the cash and then gave it to the croupier in exchange for new stacks of chips. More stacks than what he had just lost. More than he had ever bet before. More than he had even seen in one place.

“You’re not gonna bet it all on one shot, are ya?” Gary tried to ask as Gabo began shoving those stacks of chips onto the black, one after another. “Cause man, ya oughta be winnin’ it back a little bit at a time. Ten or twenty...”

“Don’t worry, cause I know what I’m doing,” Gabo cut him off with an air of absolute confidence.

“But man, you’re gonna...”

Gabo slid over to block the big man with his body as the guy reached out to remove some of the chips from the black. “I know what I’m doing!” he shouted in a tone that brooked no reply. “I been playing all week!!” So I know that I have to win this time. Because a losing streak can’t go on forever. So I have to win. All my money back. Right here, right now. I have to win. I just...

Five, red!! Wait a minute! What’s that!? What just happened?

Gabo wanted to grab his chips back before it was too late, wanted to protect them from the croupier’s stick. And he wanted to shout, “Please don’t take my money. Please! Stop!!” Or maybe he wanted to turn to his friend and shout, “More money! You’ve gotta give me more money.”

None of those words ever made it to his lips, though. They vanished before they got there, gone the instant he saw the look in his friend’s bloodshot blue eyes. That look not of anger or resentment or even reproach, but rather it was a look of disbelief. A questioning look that seemed to ask, “Did you really do that just now? Did you really throw away all the money I had on two spins of the wheel?”

A look with such wordless eloquence in its unspoken queries that Gabo was instantly thrown onto the defensive. “I don’t know what happened,” he whined as he began to speak at last. “I don’t know why it kept...”

Without a word, Gary turned and walked away. Off to the hotel lobby and then up to the room as Gabo followed meekly along in his wake, much too overwhelmed by a fast-rising sense of guilt even to whine. Too overwhelmed by the disgrace he felt at the knowledge that he had suddenly plunged the two of them into poverty even to search for excuses. And instead he answered the big man’s silence with a silence of his own as the two of them got undressed and went to bed. No television that evening and no good night, just a lot of tossing and turning on the parts of both. Bad thoughts and bad dreams at the realization that now all at once, they were in serious trouble. They were destitute. Without a dime. Stone-cold broke!

And the next morning Gary still maintained his silence despite a couple of attempts by Gabo to apologize, answering only with those sad eyes of his. Still no anger and no accusation, nothing but pain and sadness and perhaps betrayal. And the big guy never said a word during the entire time that the two of them sat putting away huge plates of the complimentary breakfast, knowing as they did that it could be their last meal in a long time.

He said nothing as they checked out of the hotel and made their way to the car. Nothing until he was already seated behind the wheel with the key in the ignition, ready to turn the engine over. Because it was only then that he opened his mouth to speak. "I tell ya what, man. There's only one place I can think of where we can go to now that we got no money or anything," he said with an air of calm certainty in his voice such as Gabo hadn't heard before. "Cause I can't go register in some hall somewhere and wait for the bank money to get there like what I was plannin' on doin'. Not when I got nothin' to live on meantime."

"So you're gonna go back?" The thought struck Gabo with a renewed sense of horror. Heading east to some place where he would be even further from home. "You're gonna go back to your bank?"

"No man, not that way, cause there's no goin' back."

"No going...?" Gabo was relieved to hear those words, though at the same time he was apprehensive.

"No, cause it's like what this wise man told me a long time ago. He says that ya can never go back. Ya always gotta go ahead, man. Ya always gotta go forward." Gary's voice was serious. Thoughtful.

"So where you...?"

"I'm goin' to _____," he named that port city which Gabo had been hoping not to hear, the home of certain woman. "Cause ya know that, uh... that pretty lady back there went and promised me a job if I wanted one, so it's like the only place on the whole coast where I got anything goin' for me, ya know. A job and all that type-a stuff."

"You sure?" Gabo wanted to argue against the idea. He wanted to make one last plea for California. For salvation or at least for a shorter route home. So that if only he could come up with some way to change the guy's mind...

"And I'll make sure she gets a job for you, too. Cause I mean, after the way ya went and helped me in that fight, watchin' my back and all that," Gary said in a tone as though everything else were forgiven and forgotten, with no reference to injuries or grudges.

"The way I...?" Oh God, why did I have to go and get involved in that fight? Gabo asked himself. Why couldn't I just stand back and watch it like a coward or something? Why did I have to go and... go and... do whatever it was that I did?

As they left town after having used the greater part of Gary's financial reserves to fill the gas tank, they didn't take the main highway heading west, but instead they took a series of secondary highways that led them off in a northerly direction, angling their way up toward that port which Gabo had no desire to see. Driving along roads where he knew that with every mile they traveled, he was getting that much further from the port at which he was registered and at which his shipping-card was fast running out. That much further from Honolulu as he was being led off instead toward some bleak and indeterminate future by a leader whose goals and motives

were a cipher to him. Hesitant at one moment and decisive at another, and leading him now into God-only-knew what.

And then just when it seemed that things couldn't possibly get any worse, suddenly the car started to make a horrible grinding sound. Gary slowing down and slowing down until finally they barely managed to creep into the next town, still hours from their destination. The big guy pulling over and parking the car near a repair shop that turned out to be closed on Sundays, at which point he looked over at his passenger and said, "Well, I guess this is it. This is as far as we're goin'."

So that now the two of them were stuck for real, with no money and no transportation back out of that little town. Nowhere to live while they were there but that broken-down old car.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: A LATE NIGHT ALARM

Or in other words, the characters in this book have just become the newest recruits into a little known subculture which exists in the United States: that of the rubber-tire homeless. Those people who live and sleep not in allies or under overpasses or in homeless shelters, but instead they live in cars parked inconspicuously along public streets or in parking lots. The cocoon of steel their only protection from the elements and the only thing standing between them and utter destitution.

And while it is a culture in which sustained membership may have involved a certain element of choice back in the boom days of the fifties and sixties, that all began to change as the economy stalled out in later years and left more and more people with no alternative. Unable to afford a better home thanks to the inexorable rise in housing prices which began sometime early in the seventies and then continued on for decade after decade, while at the same time their incomes were being squeezed by the steady erosion of good-paying jobs for people with limited skills or education. And it was that latter aspect of their dilemma which became especially acute during those many years of benign neglect toward all but the richest members of society when a policy known as trickle-down was in vogue.

Trickle-down which was quickly to become a dirty word, rejected even by its most faithful adherents who preferred to call it supply-side instead. And they wore that latter name with pride for a number of years, wore it until finally its many failings had become too obvious to be denied any longer, so that they were forced to abandon that name as well. The name if not the actual policies to which it referred. Because rather than taking the time to rethink and retool those policies once their inefficacy had been proven beyond a reasonable doubt, the people who supported them chose instead the path of denial, obfuscation. They chose to re-brand their ideas and themselves by coming up with fresh new names for the same old policies which they continued to push in virtually unaltered form. And the simple fact that those policies had failed every time they had been tried in the past seemed only to reinforce their faith and their commitment, spurring them to redouble their efforts as they tossed aside logic and common sense and even their most basic grip on reality. As they convinced themselves that despite all the evidence to the contrary, those policies had actually worked when you got right down to it. That

the tiny glimmers of success which they were able to ferret out—and over which they quickly obsessed—were signs of their impending victory, so that the only thing to do was to keep pushing and pushing. Waiting for the day when that sloppy and unpredictable place known as the world would finally start to conform to their neat and orderly theories.

As the eighties were drawing to a close, the epoch in which this section of the book is set, the original “supply-side” pseudonym for trickle-down was still in use, its disastrous consequences not yet proven in the minds of those in power so that it remained the official policy. Still pushed in its crudest form by politicians and certain academics who would quickly brush aside any concerns which might be voiced by others. Growing pains, those rich old men would call it as working people suffered, as they watched their jobs disappear and their lives crumble.

And then as though the plight of working Americans weren’t bad enough already in the long years of decline that followed the advent of trickle-down, there always seemed to be whole gangs of economists waiting in the wings, ready to pounce. Some of them the same people who had been behind those failed policies while others were not, though all of them prepared at a moment’s notice to add insult to injury by attacking anyone who dared to complain. Calling them Luddites when not resorting to harsher terms, and presenting page after page of statistics to show that for every job lost, another was created, if not two or three. Showing off their skill with numbers in that way while at the same time providing the world with a glaring example of their own limitations in every other area of thought. Their ignorance and short-sightedness. Their inability to see the reality which lies beyond those statistics.

Because while there may be some theoretical “aggregate” world in which their God-like pronouncements are valid, that is far from being the case in that place which we commonly refer to as the “real world.” That world of flesh and blood—of real human consequences—in which we mere mortals are obliged to live our lives. Far below the economists’ ethereal realm.

That world in which we are forced to suffer and struggle when we lose our livelihoods, to search desperately for some new niche within a fast-changing world. And while some of the youngest and most adaptable among us may quickly succeed in doing so, soon finding new ways in which to prosper, that is not at all the normal case despite what the economists and their statistics may have to say. Not even close. Because for the vast majority of displaced workers, those new and better jobs which the economists tout are going to appear somewhere else. At a different place and a different time, to be taken up by someone else who is better positioned or better prepared, while their own lives continue their decline uninterrupted. And that was true even in the case of the original Luddites, almost none of whom ever recovered from the loss of their former way of life. Most of them spending the remainder of their short, miserable lives in the direst of poverty.

Complain and you’re a Luddite, though, so of course we never complain, we good red-blooded Americans. We blame ourselves instead. That was the case with me anyway, when I was forced at one point in the late eighties to make an extended stay in my car, having fallen victim to the many years of slow shipping which for me will always characterize that decade. I blamed myself for my plight, blamed my lack of foresight and poor money-management skills as I had allowed my savings to be eaten away during those tough years in which I had suffered through

longer and longer periods of unemployment between ships. My bank account growing steadily smaller as the years went by until finally during one of my forced “vacations” late in the decade, I found myself almost completely without funds. With nowhere to go and nowhere but my car in which to live.

I knew little about that way of life at the time, so it took me several nights of trial and error before I discovered what seemed like the perfect street in which to spend my nights. A street that was not too busy though not too quiet either, so that a car such as mine would be inconspicuous. Calling the attention of no one as I began to learn my way around that marginal new world: the bathrooms I could use on the sly and the cheapest places to buy my food. And at the same time, I soon became aware of the fact that I wasn’t alone out there, that there were others just like myself. Neighbors in that curb-side community. Like for instance, there was a man who lived in a Chevy which he always parked a block or so down the street from my own chosen spot, and there was another who lived in a Ford which was there on some nights while on others it wasn’t. And then most depressingly of all, it wasn’t long before I began to notice a beat-up old station wagon which would appear each evening, home to a woman and a whole group of young children.

The car would drive off every morning as the woman took her kids to school before heading off to wherever it was that she spent her days, sleeping most likely. And then every evening she would be back, parking a short distance from me before getting out to walk the last block to the convenience store in which she worked until late at night. That carload of kids left behind with no adult supervision during most of the night and no protection beyond the locks on the doors.

As I saw the group of them so alone and so vulnerable on those cold, dark nights, I soon took it upon myself to go over and offer what help I could. Offering to park in the next space down from theirs where I could serve as a neighborhood watchman of sorts, a guardian and protector for that carload of kids, while perhaps becoming a family friend in the process. Surrogate father for the children and shoulder-to-cry-on for the mother during those nights when she felt like she just couldn’t take it anymore.

Joanne was her name, and as she described some of the chain of events which had led her little family into their present predicament, the story she told me was one that by then had become all too common. One that began on the day when the company she had been working for in a certain Midwestern town decided to close its plant and move its operations to a low-ball state located somewhere further to the south. And though in her case the company never actually told her that she was fired, it had presented her with a highly unpleasant choice instead: either she could move to the new location where she would be paid half of what she had been making previously, with no medical benefits and no pension, or else she could choose to be laid-off. Choose as she did in the end to live on unemployment while she searched for a new job in that town where the closure of the plant had just sent the local job market into a death-spiral. Making a decision on that day which she soon came to regret because of its disastrous short-term consequences, though as I was to find out later, none of that really would have mattered in the longer run since the company ended up closing its southern plant after a number of years and moving its operations to an even lower low-ball country. A place which offered them even lower wages and less regulation than had that low-ball state.

With three children to support and unemployment as her only income, it hadn't taken long for Joanne's savings to evaporate and her mortgage to fall behind. And since she could count on no help at all from her ex-husband, not a penny in child support while he seemed to be doing everything he could to obstruct her efforts to sell the house, she soon found herself staring into the face of foreclosure and homelessness. With no one to fall back upon since her parents were dead and she had no close relatives living nearby, and with no dependable, fully-paid home in which to live besides her car.

And so as her unemployment checks were about to run out, with foreclosure looming just ahead, she had packed up everything she could fit into that car of hers and driven it away from her old life. Driven it out of that town and that state and that entire region of the country. All the way to the promised land, California. Telling herself at the time that if she was going to be living in her car for the next few weeks or even months, she may as well do so in a place where it never snowed. A place with a mild and pleasant climate, not to mention the fact that the job prospects had to be a whole lot better out there than what they were back at home.

So much better, in fact, that within days of her arrival she had found work. She had found that night-clerk job at the convenience store down the street where she was soon spending long, lonely nights sitting behind the store counter. Making enough money to keep her children clothed and fed, though with almost nothing left over to put aside toward a first-and-last month's rent. So that with a second job being out of the question, even the time to go looking for a new and better one hard to come by between sleep and childcare, she appeared to be stuck for the foreseeable future. With no way to move up and move on, no way to find an apartment in which she could afford to live, rents being what they are in the Golden State. No way ever to find a real home for herself and her children in that new home of hers.

And it was heartbreaking for me to be around that little family of hers as they lived under such difficult conditions, the mother and three children all packed together into a single car. It was horrible to think about the future those children faced as they grew up in that way, those children who otherwise could have achieved so much in life had their circumstances only been better. Because they were a good bunch of kids, each and every one of them. Smart and brave and honest. And especially Andy, the oldest of the three and the one I came to know the best. The one I came to love in a way that I never had with a child before, not even with my nieces and nephews.

Andy was around ten years old at the time I knew him, high-spirited and intelligent and in desperate need of a father-figure, as I soon came to realize. In need of a man with whom he could bond and whose example he could follow. A man such as I evidently became over the next few weeks, with Andy coming to visit me in my car each evening just after his mother had left for work, returning to his own car when he was ready to sleep, while during the hour or so between, the two of us would sit there talking in the way that a father and son might. Talking about guy-stuff, about sports and super heroes and all the other topics that mothers never seem to know or care anything about.

There were times during our talks when Andy would bring up more serious subjects, however, tell me about all the problems he was having at his school. About how some of the other kids would pick on him because he was poor and wore cheap clothes and didn't have a

home. Call him names and insult him in ways that seemed to eat right into him, the anger and pain so raw that they practically radiated from his little face whenever he brought the subject up.

“Should I fight em?” he asked me on more than one occasion. “My dad always says ya gotta fight back against people like that.”

“Fight? Geez, I don’t know about that...” was all I could think to say the first time he asked me. “How bout the teacher? Maybe ya oughta go tell the teacher.”

“The teacher? She doesn’t care. She’s on their side.”

The teacher on the side of the bullies? I didn’t know what to say about a situation like that. What to offer him in the way of fatherly advice other than the usual sticks-and-stones nonsense. Or perhaps the even more ineffectual, “Oh, it’ll get better someday, so don’t worry about it.”

Though improve the situation never did during the time that I knew him. Instead it grew steadily worse, to judge from the rising frequency of his complaints and from the way that pained expression became ever more a permanent fixture upon his face. Andy suffering in a way that only sensitive, intelligent children ever do, and tearing at my heart so relentlessly that in the end, I had to step in. I just had to. Had to try to do something to help.

Had to go out and bang my head against the wall would be a better way to describe the meeting I had with that principal of his on the day I went to see her. That woman who turned out to be so thick-headed that I was left feeling angry and frustrated from the first word she spoke. When she made it clear from the very beginning that she took whatever the other kids had to say at face value, while she refused to believe a word that came from Andy’s mouth. Not from Andy’s and not from mine. And she even came right out at one point and said, “We never had any problems around here till Andy came.”

Oh, it was so awful when I had to go back and face Andy that evening, had to tell him that my mission had been as much a failure as his mother’s earlier efforts had been. It was almost impossible for me to look his way as he sat in the seat beside me, listening to me apologize again and again. Tell him how sorry I was that I had nothing to offer, no solution and no hope for a solution. Nothing but more of the same.

More but even worse as apparently the other kids attacked him more viciously than ever on the next day. They threatened him and called him names and teased him for having sent some old bum off the streets to go talk to the principal and make accusations against them. And they pushed him so hard that day that finally Andy exploded, finally he fought back in the way that his father had taught him. Fought back with his fists as he took on the biggest and loudest of his tormentors and beat that kid to a pulp. And as he got himself expelled in the process by that principal who did nothing to the bully who had brought the whole thing on. Treated him like the poor, innocent victim of an unwarranted act of aggression while she blamed the whole thing on Andy.

“It’s not fair,” he whined as he sat in my car that evening. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said back while trying to think of something more to say, something wise and knowing and comforting. Something better than yet another apology or another, “I just don’t get it. I can’t understand why she’d do that.”

And as I sat there stammering and speaking in empty platitudes, Andy finally opened the door and got out of the car. One last, “I’m sorry,” the only words I could muster as I watched him walk away. “Sorry I couldn’t...” help.

With his departure, I was left alone to spend an uneasy night in that car of mine. No one for company but my troubled conscience and my sense of inadequacy as I tossed and turned within those narrow, metal-encased confines. Slept without rest until suddenly I was startled awake by a loud banging on the window of my car and by Joanne’s voice shouting through the glass to ask me if I had seen Andy.

“No, he left here a long time ago,” I shouted back as I sat up and pulled on my coat and shoes. Got out of the car to talk to her and find out what had happened.

And then as the two of us stood there together in that dark, silent street, she spoke to me in a frantic tone, telling about how she had returned to her car at the end of her shift in the convenience store to find that Andy was gone. Only a note left behind where her son should have been, she said as she handed me the note and asked me to read it. Asked me what I thought about that rambling little screed, as it turned out to be, written in a childish hand and complaining about all the terrible things that had been done to him at school. About the lack of understanding on the part of some adults and about the powerlessness of others. And finally the note ended with a solemn declaration that he refused to live in a place like that any longer. Not when there was no “justus” to be found around there.

As I read those words, I was just as alarmed as Joanne, and so I spent the remainder of that night searching for any sign of the boy. I walked everywhere I could think of in one direction from the car while she did the same in the other, and I talked to everyone I could find, asking them if they had seen anything of him. I went over and talked to the guy in the Chevy for the first time ever, and I talked to the one in the Ford as well, and I rapped on the windows of other cars which I found parked on nearby streets. I walked for miles before finally returning to the car just as Joanne was getting ready to take her other kids to school. No sign of Andy anywhere, she told me as I told her the same, so that there was nothing left to do right then but to hope. Just wait and hope that sooner or later he would come back.

Though did he ever return to his family? I’m afraid I can’t answer that question since it was on that very day that I finally managed to get myself a ship after all those months of waiting, those weeks of living in my car. I got a ship that would take me away from that little world even before the fall of night as I sailed off into the setting sun. As I left behind that car and those local problems to solve themselves as best they could. Joanne and Andy and the other kids, all of them long gone by the time I made it back months later, so that I was never to see or hear from them again. Never to find out what became of that bright, friendly boy I had known and loved for so brief a time, whether his mother ever found him again or not.

And while my sincere hope is that she did so in the end, that she returned him to the family fold unharmed, I have to admit that there is another part of me that hopes she never did. Hopes that he will never be found by her or by anyone else. Hopes that Andy is still somewhere out there instead. Still on the loose and still fighting for “justus.”

FOR WORSE

Why didn’t I stick with Cornelius? Gabo asked himself again and again as he struggled through a cold, miserable night in the backseat of the car, trucks rumbling by on the street outside. Because Cornelius would have found some way to get us back to the coast, I know he would. And then with my shipping-card being as old as it is, I’d already be on a ship by this time. I’d be out at sea right now, at this very moment, standing watches and sleeping in a bed and eating good food. And making enough money to get me back home instead of being stuck out here like this. Broke and cold and hungry and lost. With a leader who’s got no idea what he’s doing or where he’s going. Talking me into all that gambling stuff and making me lose my money so that now... Oh, what was I thinking when I ran out on good old Cornelius? What was I thinking?

As the light of dawn struck Gabo’s eyelids at last, he rolled over into a different position in an attempt to avoid it. Unwilling to open his eyes when he knew what he would find out there, knew how much more depressing the reality on the outside of those lids was sure to be than what he saw on the inside. That outside world of cold and hunger and deprivation, with nowhere to live but a broken-down old car and nothing to eat but the peanut butter and cheap bread they had bought the night before in a little convenience store down the street. Their supper and soon to be their breakfast. Peanut butter and bread and nothing more.

Gabo didn’t want to face that meal or any other aspect of the sordid reality which he knew to be awaiting him that day. And there is no telling how long he might have gone on in his fight to avoid full consciousness had it not been for the words that came his way from the front seat. “Hey man, we better be gettin’ up so we don’t go callin’ attention to ourselves, sleepin’ out here in the daylight,” Gary’s gentle voice said.

Get up? No-o-o-o.

“Good mornin’, man. Did ya sleep okay?” the big guy asked as Gabo opened his eyes and began to stir at last. Soon went on when the only reply was a low grunt, “I know this old car ain’t much, buy hey, at least we’re not sleepin’ out on the street or somethin’, a cold night like this. And at least we’re not starvin’ either.”

Small comfort to someone who was accustomed to so much better. A home and family and a bed of his own, along with all the food he could eat. So Gabo didn’t know what to say as he sat up in the back seat, shivering slightly from the cold as he readjusted the big coat which the other man had given him the night before. His mind more focused on a quest for warmth at that moment than it was on words.

“Ya know, I been thinkin’ about it,” Gary droned on in a gratingly upbeat tone, more upbeat than anything Gabo had heard during the flush times in Nevada, for some reason, “and I’m wonderin’ why the hell we wanted to come to that repair shop over there anyway. Cause I mean, even if they can fix this car up, there’s no way we’re ever gonna be able to pay em for it. And with the type-a problems this thing’s got... Well, I guess ya heard how bad it is, huh? Cause it sounded like the whole damn transmission’s shot, along with I don’t know what all else.”

“So we can’t fix it?” Gabo began to find his trembling voice at last.

“No man, no way. Cause we can’t pay for the job even if it was worth doin’ on a car this old, which it’s probably not. So we’re just...” The guy paused as though in thought. “Man, the only thing this old car’s good for anymore is sellin’ it for scrap. Just gettin’ rid of it and takin’ whatever we can get for it, which ain’t gonna be much. Not even enough to pay for the tow-truck, I don’t imagine. So we’re really stuck, man. We’re between a rock and a hard place. Cause like either we can go on livin’ in this old car that’s never gonna take us anywhere, or else we can leave it here and go out hitchhikin’ the rest-a the way.”

“Hitchhike!?” Oh God, what was Gabo’s life coming to now? And where was this leader taking him? Fighting and gambling and sleeping in a car, and now the guy was talking about hitchhiking! Like there was no bottom anymore. No limit to how far his life could sink, how low this guy could...

“Yeah man, cause like I said, either we do that or else we stick around here. Try to pick up a job or somethin’ and make enough money to get us a ticket outa town.”

“A job?” Gabo wanted to grasp at a straw, any straw. “Doing what?”

“I don’t know, man. Like maybe pickin’ apples or somethin’. Whatever they got goin’ on around here.”

Picking apples? That wasn’t seaman’s work. It wasn’t... Or wait a minute, Gabo said to himself as the idea began to sink in. I come from a long line of pineapple-pickers, don’t I? So maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all, walking around picking the fruit off the trees. That’d be a whole lot better than that... the other alternative.

And so his spirits were somewhat revived as he finished his morning preparations—his peanut butter breakfast and his surreptitious visit to a nearby restroom—and then started for town with the big guy at his side. The two of them the only pedestrians in sight as they made their way through the gasoline-powered no-man’s-land that guarded the southern approaches to town. Car lots and fast-food joints and big-box stores with even bigger parking lots, though no actual human beings in evidence anywhere. None that weren’t inside automobiles or else making quick dashes between car and store, anyway. And it wasn’t until after they had gone on for many blocks that finally a real town began to appear.

A town which was rather attractive when you got right down to it, Gabo had to admit to himself as they made their approach. Clean and prosperous-looking in a cowboy sort of way, with a downtown core that stretched a few blocks wide and several blocks long. And there was even an employment office tucked away on one of the nearby streets, as Gary soon discovered

after a visit to a phone booth. So that within minutes of their arrival in town, the big man was leading the way there. Leading them toward something that for once wouldn't end in disaster, Gabo hoped. Wouldn't end with...

"Sorry, but there's no one hiring pickers right now," the lady who worked in the office told them in a tired voice as though she had said it a million times before.

"No one? Not anywhere around here?"

"Sorry," she said again, the only answer she had to offer for that and every other question Gary asked her over the next minute or two. Sorry but there's nothing around here for the two of you. Nothing at all.

I can't believe it! Gabo said to himself as they stepped back outside. I can't believe how this thing just keeps getting worse. How this leader of mine... This incompetent leader!

And there is no telling what more he might have said, what he might have done had it not been for the one spark of hope which the lady in the office had given them, the one bit of positive information she'd had to offer. Because as they were leaving, she had told them about a little job-buying agency down the street which they could try if they wanted to. One of those places where they charge the workers for their services, make them pay for the minimum-wage casual-labor jobs that they have to offer.

"So what about it? We gotta go, right?" Gabo asked as they reached the sidewalk.

"There?" Gary asked back. "That rip-off place?"

"Somewhere, man. We gotta go somewhere. Cause we gotta get a job."

"But there?" Gary's tone sounded less forceful now than it had before, as though his resistance to the idea were starting to slip. And then after a brief look into his smaller partner's imploring eyes, he seemed to shrug and concede the point altogether. "Well, I don't see what other choice we got, huh? Cause either it's that or else... I don't know what."

And so despite the air of reluctance with which the big man proceeded, a reluctance so pronounced as to shade into outright aversion, soon the two of them were walking through the door of that agency and addressing the casually over-bearing character who ran it. Being told by him that he had nothing for them right then, though if they wanted to hang around something might come up. A job moving furniture or loading trucks or doing some type of cleaning work, you never knew what it was going to be in that line of business. And in the meantime, they could fill out some forms which he handed to them.

"Thanks," said Gary as he took the papers and started for the door, barely glancing at the small collection of down-and-outers in the waiting area.

"No, ya gotta do em now so I can..."

"Thanks, I said," Gary cut him off in a hard, no-nonsense tone as he looked steadily into the eyes of that man who was so used to having his way, so used to pushing his clients around. Though now as he met someone who refused to bend, he seemed to blink himself, said nothing more as the big man turned and left, papers in hand.

"That goddamn rip-off!" Gary blurted out once the two of them reached the sidewalk, speaking with the first signs of anger in his voice that Gabo had ever heard. "I can't believe it, man. And I tell ya what, I'm nowhere near desperate enough to go workin' for some asshole like that. Not when I still got a good thumb on me. Not when I can still hitch my way outa this town if I want to."

"Please, not hitchhike," Gabo whined back. "Not hitchhike..."

"Anything, man! Anything besides gettin' ripped-off by another one-a them assholes. Because this shit..." He waved the papers in the air before ceremoniously crumpling them up in his hands.

But hitchhike!? With all those crazy people out there just waiting to kill you and stuff? There had to be some other way to get out of that town, some way for them to make a little money and then buy a ticket out. There had to be... Something!

Gabo's mind began to search for solutions while his big friend seemed to lose himself in silent contemplation as well. He thought about places where they might be able to get the money they needed, like say by asking for it in one of the banks around there, walking inside and asking them... asking... Or hey! What about the government? Couldn't they get on welfare or something? Find a government building where they could go in and go... Stand in line and then wait and wait and wait... Or you know what, when you get right down to it, they could always try begging on the streets, couldn't they? They could walk up to every stranger they saw and ask them for money, begging or panhandling or whatever you...

"Ya know, I just been thinkin' about it, man," Gary spoke up all at once in a solemn tone. "And if ya don't wanta go hitchin' outa here, then there's only one other choice we still got left. Cause I tell ya what, I'm not gonna go out panhandlin' or any-a that bullshit, and I'm not gonna go robbin' a bank."

Oh, God forbid!

"Cause the only money I'm gonna take is honest money. And the only way I know how to do that around here is if we go out lookin' for the place where they do the street-hirin' in this town."

"Street-...?"

"Yeah, you know. The place where they hire people off-a the street, pay em in cash, everything under-the-table. One day's pay for one day's work. And there's nobody takin' out any fees or anything like that, so ya get to keep whatever ya make. Like enough for us to eat a decent meal tonight, and then a bus ticket outa town after we get in a couple-a good days."

“But doing what?” The idea sounded better and more realistic than anything Gabo had been able to come up with on his own, though still he wanted details. “Doing what work?”

“Anything man, just about anything. Cause whatever some guy’s willin’ to pay us to do, that’s what we’re gonna do... Long as it’s legal,” Gary added emphatically.

The two of them found nothing to the north of town as they set out upon their quest for the local open-air labor market, the main road making a sharp turn at the edge of downtown and then heading out into a rural-looking area while the streets that continued north became residential, so that soon they were on their way back to the south. “We musta missed it,” Gary said as they turned to retrace their steps. “Cause like it must not be on that main drag.” And then, “It’s gotta be somewhere around here,” he added some minutes later as they plunged back into that consumerist wasteland, looking on all sides as they went. Looking for tell-tale signs of that place at which workers and employers come together each day, workers with no other options and employers who can afford nothing better. They looked but saw nothing, no groups of unemployed men milling about and not even anyone to ask. Not until they finally came upon the first fellow-pedestrian they had seen in that entire area, that is, a Mexican-looking guy who seemed to have casual-laborer written all over him as he strolled aimlessly down the street.

“Hey man, how’s it goin’?” Gary asked after having redirected their steps in the man’s direction. When the man’s reply came in Spanish, though, the big guy soon began to throw out a few disjointed words in that language. “*Trabajo. Donde?*” he said with gestures included. Still more gestures when the man answered him in flowing sentences of which he obviously understood not a word. Raising his hands into the universal sign for, “Stop,” before waving them about as though to say, “Point, just point.” A smile and a handshake at the end. “*Gracias, muchas gracias,*” along with a few English words of thanks before he and his friend started off in the direction indicated.

Off toward a street running parallel to the main road, where they turned and headed back to the north for a couple of blocks until at last they came to the parking lot of a big hardware store, in one corner of which a few shabbily dressed men could be seen standing. Those last stragglers who were so far down on the totem pole that they still hadn’t managed to find a willing boss even by that late-morning hour. There was a group of three or four men who looked like Mexicans standing off to one side, along with some disreputable-looking white guy who stood by himself, dirty and ragged and apparently in great need of a drink. The type of person to be avoided at all costs under normal circumstances, though since he was the only obvious English-speaker in the area, it was he toward whom Gary led the way.

“Hey man, how’s it goin’ today? Any work?” he asked in a casual, friendly tone.

“Ya think I’d still be here if there was?” came the reply in a voice even more repugnant than the man’s appearance. “And I don’t need no fuckin’ competition around here, either,” he added in a combative tone before turning to spit on the pavement.

“Yeah well, good luck,” Gary said as he moved off with his little partner in the direction of the Mexicans. The two of them stopping about halfway there and then turning to look about while they waited for something to happen. Something good for a change. Watching the cars that

drove around the lot or passed by on adjacent streets and hoping—praying in Gabo’s case—that one of those drivers would stop and offer them a job. Any type of job. Anything at all.

Please, Gabo pleaded with the drivers in silence. Please stop. You’ve gotta stop. Cause I can’t take any more peanut butter.

But nobody came by to offer them a job as minutes and then hours ticked slowly by. Nobody came to their rescue as the two desperate men stood watching and waiting and waiting some more. Past midday and into the afternoon as the Mexicans began to drift off one by one, even the white guy giving up in the end and walking away, so that finally there were only the two of them left. Gary and Gabo and no one else.

“Ya know, it looks like we’re wastin’ our time out here,” Gary said at last. “Looks like we got here too damn late in the day, so we’re just... We’re fucked, man. We’re gonna be eatin’ peanut butter sandwiches again tonight.”

Peanut butter sandwiches!! For supper tonight, not to mention breakfast tomorrow as they went off to spend another miserable night in that ice-box of a car. That place with no heat and no facilities but the restroom at the gas station down the street. Oh, what a horrible thought! And what a horrible mess they were in, Gabo and this leader of his. This... How was it possible that a guy who seemed so nice and easy-going could be leading him from one disaster to another in the way that this one was? Almost like it was a conspiracy or something. From fighting to gambling to living in a car to... What was next? Hitchhiking? The next step in the long, slow decline into which his life had entered. The next stop along this... this... road to perdition which the guy was so steadily leading him down.

“One more day and that’s it, man,” Gary looked up and said suddenly as he sat in the car spreading peanut butter onto a piece of bread with his pocket-knife. “One more day to get us a job and get some money, or else that’s it. I’m hitchin’ my way outa here whether ya come along with me or not. Cause this shit, man... I’m not gonna live like this any longer than that. I’m not gonna do it.”

“We gonna get something, man,” Gabo tried to muster all the false hope that he could. “Tomorrow for sure.” Because if not, then... Oh God, not hitchhiking. Not with all those crazy people they have out there on the road. Not that. Not hitchhiking!

When the two of them arrived back at the parking lot in the early morning twilight next day, they found that a crowd was already starting to gather, with a couple dozen people there before them and more arriving all the time. An awful lot of people for a town that size, Gary commented at one point. Most of them were men, though there were a few women scattered about within the small, unorganized horde that stood around waiting, some in groups that conversed in Spanish or English and some by themselves. And while a number of the most lightly dressed among them could be seen shivering and hugging themselves as they stomped their feet with the cold, even those wearing heavy coats looked uncomfortable on that icy fall morning as steam rose from their breath.

They looked almost as uncomfortable as Gabo felt, dressed in his thin shore-going clothes though with a huge, over-sized coat draped around him. Gary’s coat which hung all the

way to his knees and which, while it may have been doing something to maintain his core body temperature, offered no protection whatsoever from the chill he felt on every exposed part of his body. His face, his hands which he tried to keep inside the pockets at all costs.

As the light of dawn began to grow brighter, the first few pickups and other likely-looking vehicles made their appearance. All those who waited there turning to watch while a few of the veterans offered comments about what they saw, speaking in whatever language it happened to be. "Look out for that guy. Ya don't wanta go workin' for him." Or, "Hey, there he is. I hope he's got lotsa work today." Or, "Ya ever see that guy before?"

Some of the drivers seemed to be regulars, picking up workers they already knew, while others appeared to make their selections in rather haphazard ways, pulling to a stop right in front of the crowd only to be inundated by a small human mass which would surround their vehicles and only disperse after the drivers had said, "You, you and you." And then there was another type of driver in that lot who would stop some distance away, evidently scanning the crowd in search of specific types before finally moving in with their selections already made.

Choosing big, strong men, some of them in that category, as appeared to be the case with one driver who pulled up and yelled at Gary, "Hey you, the big guy." Offering similar invitations to a couple of others in the steadily shrinking crowd.

"How bout my friend? Can ya take him, too?" Gary yelled back as the other two men scrambled to get into the back of the guy's late-model pickup.

"What? Your friend!?" the driver said with disgust in his voice as he looked at Gabo in the clownish outfit he wore, turning his attention back to Gary an instant later. "I don't need no fuckin' attitude!" he shouted before pointing at another man nearby and saying, "You."

"That's it, man. I'm fuckin' finished!" Gary growled as the pickup drove off. "I've had it. I'm outa here."

"No, you can't do that. It's early. They're still hiring, so we still got a shot," Gabo begged as though for his life. "You gotta stay, man. You can't leave me. You gotta stay."

Gary didn't look back at him, though. He just stared off into the distance with a hard expression on his face. Saying nothing but making no move to walk away either, which Gabo took for a hopeful sign.

"You know we gonna get something anytime now, don't you? Anytime. We gonna get us a job, and we gonna eat good tonight. Real good."

But Gary's face failed to register in any way to the pleading or the feigned optimism as he seemed to be lost in thought instead. Deaf to his companion's entreaties until suddenly he lowered his eyes to the ground and spoke. "Okay, you win," he said with more decision in his voice than surrender. Looking back up a moment later as he went on in that same tone, "Only thing is that we're not gonna keep on doin' it this way, just standin' around out here waitin' for some job to fall into our laps. Cause what we're gonna do is we're gonna take charge-a this thing instead. We're gonna go out and find us our own job."

Huh?

After the briefest of explanations, the two of them were on their way, leaving that corner of the parking lot in which the losers congregated and taking the initiative themselves. Walking right out into the lot itself where they looked about for some potential boss to whom they could offer their services. Someone. Anyone, as far as Gabo was concerned.

“What about that guy?” he pointed at a man in the near distance. “No,” came the reply. “How bout that one over there?” “No.” “Hey, there’s a guy over there.” “No.”

Gary seemed dissatisfied with everyone they saw, though since he never explained himself, Gabo had no idea what could be wrong with them. Were they too much the homeowner-do-it-yourself types? Or did they look like rip-offs? Or did they seem hostile? He couldn’t tell.

And he also couldn’t tell why it was that a light seemed to go on in the big man’s eyes all at once at the sight of some middle-aged cowboy-looking type loading piles of building materials into the back of an old pickup truck. Gary pointing at the man and saying, “That’s him. That’s the guy we been lookin’ for, I can feel it in my guts. That’s the guy we gotta ask.” Saying it with an air of certainty.

“Hello mister. I just wanta let ya know that if ya got any work ya wanta get done around your place, ya got two good men right here who’re ready to do it for ya.” Gary spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, with no boast and no sales pitch, just a simple and straightforward that’s-how-it-is.

“Oh yeah?” the cowboy turned with a skeptical look on his face which quickly began to soften as he looked Gary over. His size and bearing, his forthright and honest face. “Ya want work, huh?” he asked in a tone as unadorned and direct as Gary’s. “So what’m I gonna pay ya with?”

“Oh, it doesn’t have to be much. Just whatever ya can afford, whatever ya think’s fair.”

“What I think’s fair? Shoot man, I can’t pay ya that much.” The cowboy laughed slightly as he spoke.

“Okay then, just make it whatever ya can afford. Cause it doesn’t gotta be that much. And I tell ya, if ya say yes, ya won’t ever regret it.”

“Ya know, I sure would like to, cause I could use the help. There’s always a lot more work around that place than I can do myself...” The cowboy’s words trailed off as though losing himself in thought, finally speaking back up a moment later. “Ya ever do any cowboyin’?”

“No sir, we never did. Cause we’re seamen.”

“Seamen?” the cowboy sounded confused all at once. “So whattaya comin’ to me for? I don’t got a boat or a ship or whatever ya call it.”

“No sir, I know ya don’t,” Gary went on as calmly as ever. “But I’ll tell ya one thing about seamen that ya may not know, is that we can do damn near any type-a work. We can build

stuff or fix just about anything, and we can even put out fires when we got to. Cause ya know, when you're out there at sea ya can't go runnin' to anyone else if ya need help. You're on your own out there, so ya gotta do everything for yourself."

Wow, the guy's laying it on pretty thick, isn't he? Gabo thought as he listened to his leader speak. Because maybe the engineers might fix up lots of different stuff, but me, about the only thing I ever do is chip-and-paint.

As the cowboy listened, though, his attitude toward Gary's words seemed to be far less critical than Gabo's. His face soon taking on a glow of satisfaction at the man he saw or the things he heard or both. "Ya know, I sure would like to..."

"And like I say, you're gonna be gettin' two men for the price-a one."

"Two men?" The cowboy turned to look directly at Gabo for the first time. "I don't know..." he muttered, his voice starting to lose some of its positive edge.

"Yeah, cause he's a good man," Gary leaped to his little friend's defense. "He's a real hard worker."

"I don't know..." the cowboy muttered once again, sounding far from convinced.

"I can do it. I can work," Gabo spoke up for the first time as he stood self-consciously under the man's gaze. Asking himself at the same time, So what's wrong with me? Does he think I can't work because I'm small? Or because I'm a Filipino? Is this guy some type of racist or something? This old cowboy...

"I mean, ya call them work-clothes he's got on there?" the guy finally finished his thought. "Cause I tell ya, there's more work around my place than what I got good men to do it for me, or money to pay em with. So I could use ya..."

"Don't worry about the price, we'll just take whatever we can get," Gary resumed speaking for the pair. "And as far as them work-clothes go... Well, it's just that we weren't expectin' to be doin' any work around here, so we got caught kinda... unawares."

"Yeah, I can see that," the cowboy said as he faded into thought once again. As he stood silent after that while the seconds ticked ever so slowly by. Five. Ten... "Okay, you win," he came back at last. "I'll put ya to work, but I can't, uh... Like I said before, I can't hardly pay ya much..."

"Deal!" said Gary, sticking out his big hand to shake.

And, "Deal," echoed Gabo, a sense of relief flooding through him as he shook hands as well.

"Okay then, let's get to work," said their new boss once the bargain had been sealed. "Let's get this truck loaded, and let's get goin'. And then we can stop at the thrift store on the way outa town and get some work-clothes for, uh... What's his name?"

“Gabo. His name’s Gabo, and mine’s Gary.”

“Well, hi there Gary and... Gabo, ya say it is? My name’s Brett.”

As they were making their way out of town a short time later, the three men squeezed together in the cab of the truck with Gabo in the middle, a bag of new used work-clothes on his lap, Gary made a few mild attempts at opening a conversation among them. Talking about the landscape and the weather while Brett answered in a quiet, tight-lipped sort of way, volunteering little. And though the guy looked over a few times like he was about to ask a question, the queries never quite made it all the way out.

Not until one time, anyway. Brett finally speaking up as though he could contain himself no longer. “So ya been to a lotta places on those ships?” he asked in a halting tone, his curiosity leavened by shyness or reserve.

“Yeah, I been to quite a few,” Gary answered in that nothing-to-hide way of his.

“Like to, uh... Like ya ever been to Africa?”

“Africa? Sure. Lotsa times.”

And with that Gary was off and running with one of his sea-stories, one of those old-guy stories about some ship to Africa he had worked on years before. He was telling it to the other old guy who sat behind the wheel of the truck with a strange, fascinated look coming over his face as he listened, expressions like, “Wow,” and, “Ya don’t say,” escaping his lips. And when the old cowboy said those things, he did so with such quiet, understated enthusiasm as to spur the other man on, to coax him into a second story and a third. So that soon those two old white men seemed to be bonding in some weird sort of way, with the one guy blabbing away and the other one listening. And with both of them acting as though the younger man seated between them wasn’t even there.

Not that Gabo minded, and not that he listened to any of the stories, having already heard more than enough of them by then. Because all he really cared about at that moment was the fact that the worst of his troubles were finally behind him. No more peanut butter sandwiches for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but instead he would be eating good food from here on out. And even if he had to spend another night in that beat up old car, at least he knew that the end was in sight at last. With money being put aside to pay for a bus ticket back to the coast and back to his life. His real life.

And he felt so good about what lay ahead that even as he caught sight of Brett’s ranch at the end of their journey, still his sense of hope endured, barely dented by the decrepitude and decay which he saw. The main house in such awful shape that it hardly looked habitable, with paint peeling from the walls and the porch half-broken-down, while the other buildings that sat nearby were even worse. The old barns and sheds and whatever else they may have been, some of them so bad that he probably would have been doing the guy a favor if he were to burn the whole place to the ground.

“Did ya ever do any roofin’ before?” Brett asked as he pulled to a stop and the three of them climbed out of the truck.

“Well, uh... Yes and no,” came Gary’s rather hesitant reply. “Cause like I mainly just seen it done.”

“Yeah, I guess ya don’t got a lotta roofs out there on them ships, huh?”

“No, sir. But I tell ya what, I know enough about it to where I can figure out the rest.” Gary had conviction in his voice as he spoke. He had confidence. “Cause all I gotta do is just look at how they did the old one, and then I can put the new one on the exact same way. Me and Gabo can. We can figure it out.”

“Yeah,” Gabo added, nodding his head and trying to show as much assurance as his friend since he didn’t want to blow this thing now. This one and only chance he might have to escape a life of broken-down cars and peanut butter sandwiches without having to resort to that... that... you know, that... hitchhiking.

“Okay, sounds good,” Brett seemed to take them at their word. And then pointing at the biggest of the sheds, he soon went on, “Ya see that building over there? It needs a new roof before winter comes along, and I don’t got the time or the energy to do it myself.”

“Sure thing, boss. No problem.”

“And ya can get all the shingles and nails you’re gonna need in that little shed over there,” Brett pointed once again. “So that’s gonna be your job for today, okay? Today and tomorrow, most likely.”

“You got it.”

Before getting started, Gabo entered the building they were to work on in order to change his clothes, that old bunkhouse it appeared to be. And when he reemerged a short time later, he found that Gary was already hard at work, hauling out bundles of shingles and stacking them up nearby, followed shortly by a ladder which the guy leaned up against the building. Climbed to the top where he tore into the roof almost like it was being hit by a hurricane, ripping out the old shingles in big bunches and tossing them to the ground for his smaller friend to gather up. For poor little Gabo who soon found himself in a mad dash to keep up, forced to rush here and there, picking things up as quickly as his hands could grab them and carrying them over to a growing pile as fast as his legs would go. But even though he was working the hardest that he ever had in his life, still he fell steadily behind as shingles rained down in a steady torrent. As they built up into bigger and wider and deeper piles despite his best effort.

“Wow, you guys sure weren’t kiddin’ about bein’ good workers,” said Brett when he came by for a visit sometime near midday. Clearly impressed despite the mess on the ground as he gazed up at the morning’s handiwork. Everything off the roof already except for a few stray nails. And then, “I hope ya like it,” he went on as he handed out the lunch which he had brought with him.

Real food! After two days of near-starvation. Big, juicy homemade hamburgers along with apples and carrots and a jug milk. And it was all so beautiful and so delicious after those days of peanut butter that Gabo ate it with a relish he could hardly believe, polished off his burger in a few quick, ravenous bites and then looked around for more.

“Jeez, if I’d known you guys ate that much, I’d brought ya more.”

As soon as lunch was over, Gary finished the clean-up and started in on the new roof, laying out fresh tar-paper and then pounding in rows of shingles. Two strokes of the hammer on most of the nails so that he moved along almost as fast as if he had a nail-gun. He moved along so fast that Gabo had to work even harder than what he had that morning in his struggle to keep up. Grabbing stacks of shingles one after another and carrying them up the ladder. Up and down, up and down. Making so many trips that soon he was pushing himself to the very limits of his endurance. Pushing beyond those limits as he struggled to make that climb again and again, the ladder seeming to grow taller with each trip he made while the strength of his legs threatened to give out completely at any moment. And while his senses slowly dissolved into a blur of exhaustion. An exhaustion that grew ever more profound, more blinding. An utter exhaustion in every muscle, every joint such as he had never known before.

“You’re done!?” Brett said with amazement in his voice as he arrived to check on them toward the end of the working day, Gary still on the roof pounding in some of the final nails. “Shoot, I thought this was gonna be a two day job. But look at that. In one day...”

We told you we work hard, Gabo wanted to say as he turned toward his boss, pausing in his work for the first time in hours. Wanted to say something and do something besides starting back up the ladder with another bundle of shingles. Though as he opened his mouth to speak, the words failed to come, only a weak sigh making itself audible.

And he was still standing in that same spot, incapable of forcing his poor, abused body back into action even to save his life, when Gary came down the ladder and grabbed a big pile of shingles before climbing back up without a word. Pounding nails and pounding nails until a few minutes later, he was on his way back down with the leftover shingles and a nearly empty box of nails.

“Well, that’s it,” he said in that mild, unpretentious way of his as he approached the boss. “A fair day’s work, I’d call it.”

“More than a fair day,” said Brett with quiet admiration. “And ya know, I just wish I could pay you guys what you’re really worth. But with cattle prices bein’ what they are, and feed prices...”

“Ah, don’t worry about that, cause we made a deal, and that’s all there is to it. We’re gonna stick with it.”

Though a little extra wouldn’t be a bad thing, you know. Gabo had just enough strength to say those words to himself. A little extra so we can get out of here that much sooner.

“Say, I don’t know if you guys’re real anxious about gettin’ back to where ya been stayin’ in town,” Brett began hesitantly. “But it’d sure save me some hassle if I don’t gotta drive ya clear on back tonight, pick ya up in the mornin’. So ya’d be doin’ me a favor if ya’d stay out here.”

Stay out there? Sleeping in a bed instead of a car? Gabo would have been thrilled at the prospect had he been capable of feeling such strong emotions right then. Had he been capable of feeling anything other than a longing for rest.

“Yeah sure, that’s fine with us,” Gary spoke for the two of them in a calm, easy voice. “Cause it’s probably gonna be better than where we been stayin’ anyway.”

Probably!!?

Gabo was still too tired to speak aloud as the two of them entered their new home a few minutes later, that bunkhouse on whose roof they had been working all day. He was too tired to think about anything but lying down on one of the bunks and sleeping for the next week or two. So that had it not been for the gnawing hunger which he felt in his stomach, the knowledge that food awaited over at the main house, there would have been nothing to prevent him from going straight to bed, not the big guy’s orders or his entreaties or his threats. He would have been out in a minute rather than staying on his feet as he somehow managed to do, cleaning himself up and then making that one more walk over to the house.

To that main house which seemed practically empty to Gabo as he stepped inside, without the big family scattered around everywhere like what he was used to back at home. Because the only people he saw in that place were Brett and an old woman who must have been his mother. She was old enough anyway, though for some reason he introduced her as Miss Kay. And then whoever she may have been, aunt or cousin or whatever, no sooner had he and Gary taken their seats at the table than she started making trips into the kitchen and coming back out with big, heaping plates of meat and potatoes and vegetables, even a pie for dessert. And that’s not to mention the cans of beer.

Good old American beer, Gabo said to himself as he grabbed a can and guzzled it down in a way that he never had before. Finished off that first can and asked for a second which he proceeded to gulp down almost as fast. And as he poured that golden liquid into his empty stomach, it wasn’t long before it began to hit him. Hit him hard. His weariness gone in a flash as the alcohol went straight to his head and sent waves of happiness and contentment flowing through his body. Waves of giddiness, even foolishness, and an urge to giggle and cut up. An urge to tell stupid jokes.

“Hey, you know how many Pilipino electricians you need to change a light-bulb? One electrician, but you gotta hire his brother and uncle and two cousins keep him company.” Gabo laughed at his own joke as he looked around at his audience, all those old white people who smiled back at him in silence. Not a chuckle and not a word of encouragement, though not a word of discouragement either, so that whether they wanted it or not, soon he was coming out with another joke that was just as bad as the first. A second joke which he followed up with a

quip and then a quick sea-story and then another joke. The Jojo side of his personality starting to emerge all at once, and to do so with a vengeance.

And so while everyone else sat and ate in silence, Gabo quickly turned that meal into a one-man conversation. He blabbed away as he rarely had before, telling every funny sea-story he knew and making every joke that came into his head, whether funny or not. Completely lost in the role of happy-go-lucky young seaman that he was playing out. And he was so wound up in himself and what he had to say that he was only vaguely aware of the others' responses. Gary who would glance over at him indulgently, feed him the occasional line when he seemed at a momentary loss, and Brett who sat there looking on with a bemused, almost bewildered look on his face as though witnessing some spectacle such as he had never seen before, and Miss Kay who would smile politely between visits to the kitchen.

Gabo kept on talking in that way, laughing and joking throughout the meal. Caught up in an alcohol-and-exhaustion-fueled euphoria so intense that his monologue could have gone on forever, it seemed. His Jojo side running completely rampant. And it was only after the meal had come to an end, as he and his big friend stepped out into the night, that he ever fell silent. The sudden blast of cold air and the darkness sobering him up in an instant, it seemed, as he pulled his coat tighter around him, the next joke quickly fading from his mind, untold. Nothing more to be heard after that but the crunch of their footsteps on the gravel as the two of them made their way to the bunkhouse.

And the silence continued even after they were inside, Gabo taking a seat on his bunk where he watched as Gary piled wood and paper into the woodstove that sat in the center of that barren room. Without a word from either until finally the big man spoke up just as he finished his work. "Ya know, Miss Kay's not his mother or his aunt or whatever ya kept callin' her, she's his housekeeper," he said softly, the light of the growing flame glowing upon his face.

"She's what? His housekeeper...?"

"Yeah, and all that stuff ya kept sayin' about kids and families and all that... Well, it made them two kinda uncomfortable, ya know."

"Uncomfortable...?" Gabo hadn't noticed a thing. How could he when he had been so immersed in himself? His own thoughts, his own words.

"And like ya really shouldn't do it anymore, okay? Ya shouldn't talk about all that family stuff in front-a them."

"No? Not talk about... But why not? Where's his family?"

"I don't know, man. He never said, and I never asked."

"Never asked...?"

It was sometimes hard for Gabo to understand those white-person sensibilities, the way they could be so touchy about silly little things like that. Because family? What was wrong with

talking about family? What was wrong with it? Nothing that he could see. And if only he'd had a little more energy, he might have argued the point, might have demanded an explanation.

As it was, though, Gabo was feeling much too relaxed right then to undertake anything of the sort, lying on his bunk as the warmth of the fire began to reach his part of that bare-walled room. He was feeling the best, the most contented that he had in a long, long time and looking forward to the future for the first time since his departure from Honolulu, while at the same time he was relishing all the good things of the present moment. Those things which he had always taken for granted until suddenly he had found himself without them over the last couple of days: heat and a full stomach and a bed to sleep in, a real bed. And he found their return to be so uplifting now that despite his physical exhaustion, he had no real desire to sleep. Not yet anyway. His mind looking instead for ways to draw that moment out for a little while longer. Like say with another beer or a whiskey if they had any, or maybe...

"Hey, do you have more-a that stuff? That... you know, that weed?" Gabo said all at once in the same spur-of-the-moment way that he had spoken throughout the meal, so that it wasn't until he heard the words himself that their true import ever struck him. The idea that now after everything he had been through since he met this guy, from the fighting to the gambling to the almost-hitchhiking, it was like he no longer had anything left to lose by becoming a drug addict as well. By completing the fall from grace which this big leader had brought upon him.

"No man, but I sure wish I did," Gary said in a voice that revealed no surprise at the discovery that his secret had been known all along. "And I wish I could afford to pay for it even if I could find any, all that stupid-ass War on Drugs bullshit... But I tell ya what. Next time I score, I'll turn ya onto some, okay?"

Turn me on? Gabo asked. Is this guy going gay on me or what?

When he got up the next morning, Gabo's legs were so stiff that he could barely walk at first. And it took a lot of painful limping around, a slow, difficult walk to the main house for breakfast, before his muscles ever started to loosen up and the pain to become bearable. Something he could live with as he set out on another day of hard work.

A day of repairs and other carpentry work to be performed on the bigger of the two barns, he discovered as the boss gave them their assignment that morning. A day of hauling out lumber and propping things up and pounding in nails. And they had been at it for several hours when somewhere around midday, Brett came over to interrupt them and say that he was on his way to town for supplies. Telling them that they could come along if they wanted, drop what they were doing—as Gabo had been longing to do all morning—and then ride along in the comfort of that pickup truck cab as they went to get their clothes and whatever else they might need from town. With Gabo squeezed between the driver and the big man, just as he had been the day before. Forced to sit through another series of old-guy sea-stories, another boring... Though as bad as it was going to be, still it beat working all to hell.

And in fact, the trip turned out to be far better than what Gabo had been expecting, with his leader taking up less room in the cab than he remembered from the first trip, less than would seem normal for a man his size, while at the same time the sea-stories never materialized. Brett

never asked for any as though the open questioning of that first day in the truck had been something out of character. And since Gary never started in on his own, the two white men ended up riding along mostly in silence, making only the occasional comment about the scenery or the weather, while Gabo said nothing at all. Gabo who had talked himself out so completely the night before that the quiet, serious Joji side of his personality had long since taken over.

And it wasn't until after Gary had told the driver to pull up behind his broken-down old car that anything resembling a personal conversation ever took place. After he had gotten out to retrieve their belongings, stuffing everything the two of them owned into his little seabag which he soon brought over and tossed into the back of the pickup while Brett looked on with a curious expression on his face. "Okay," said Gary as he climbed back into the cab. "That's it."

"Is that all ya gonna need?" Brett asked in a vague, general sort of way, as though suppressing whatever desire he may have felt to dig deeper.

"That's all we got right now. Both of us," came Gary's no-nonsense reply. "And that's where we been livin' the last couple-a days, too."

"Yeah...?" Brett said in a flat, no-prying tone.

"Yeah, we hit a little, uh... a little run-a bad luck, I guess ya could say."

"Uh huh..."

That afternoon they finished their work on the barn, and then over the next two days they did other similar jobs around the ranch. Working on buildings and repairing fences and cutting-and-splitting firewood before spending their quiet, exhausted evenings in the bunkhouse. Together though ever more apart. Gabo too tired and sore at the end of each long, hard day to speak to anyone, even if he'd had anything to say. Or even if the other guy had spoken to him, which he rarely did. So that most evenings Gary would sit around reading a book while Gabo did his best to lose himself in sleep. To make time pass as quickly as possible and to arrive that much sooner at the end of his nightmare.

Even their suppers in the main house were quiet and soft-spoken affairs on those days, with Gabo hardly saying a word despite the beers he drank. Leaving it up to the old white people to do all the talking, what little of it there was. Long pauses followed by brief comments about the weather or the work around the ranch or something else just as innocuous. No politics and no religion, and there were never any questions about each other's private lives, either. Gary never asked Brett about his missing family or anything else that might have involved the least hint of intimacy or revelation, while Brett seemed even quicker to shy away from any topic that threatened to turn personal. Never asked his guests a single question about their pasts or their future plans or even how they had gotten themselves into the mess they were in. Nothing that didn't have to do with the weather or the work.

Never a word about money or pay or about the two of them getting out of there and getting on with their lives either, so that as Gabo sat there bored out of his head each evening, it was starting to look like he might be stuck there forever. His only escape through his thoughts,

through tuning out whatever those old people had to say and thinking instead about more pleasant things. About his home, his family.

And it wasn't until Friday evening that the subject of escape finally came up in the conversation. Real, true physical escape.

"I guess ya know I ain't the type that goes pryin' into other people's lives if they don't wanta talk about it," Brett began awkwardly, hesitantly. "But I just... I'm wonderin' how long you fellas're plannin' on stickin' around."

"We don't know exactly," Gary answered with that usual nothing-to-hide air of his. "We just gotta get a little money together is all."

"So, uh... How much ya gonna need? Cause I don't got that much left myself..."

"Oh, we don't need much. Just enough to where we can move on is all."

"What, enough to buy some gas and get that car-a yours...?"

"That old thing?" Gary laughed slightly as he said it. "No man, that thing's nothin' but a pile-a junk. It needs so damn much work on it... Pardon my French, Miss Kay."

"Oh, I heard worse," she laughed as well.

"So ya plannin' on buyin' yourself a new one?" A note of alarm began to appear in Brett's voice. "There's no way I got enough money to help ya pay for somethin' like that."

"Ah, don't worry about that. We don't need a car. We just gotta make it to the coast is all. We just gotta get there." Gary spoke with nonchalance, as though to say that he had no secrets and that the only reason he hadn't disclosed these things previously was because he hadn't been asked. "Cause to tell ya the truth, we're not really that down-and-out. We're just kinda like... We're cash-broke, I guess ya could say. We got jobs and everything waitin' for us out on the coast, but we don't got any good way-a gettin' there right now, so we're kinda like stuck."

"Ya mean ya can't...?"

"We got no cash on us is what. Not a penny cause-a this, uh... This little run-a bad luck we had a while back." Gary didn't even glance Gabo's way as he said it, so that the sudden twinge of guilt at the mention of the subject came to nothing. The big guy making it sound like an act of God. "We ran clear outa cash, and then with that car breakin' down on us, we just... We got no way to keep goin'."

"And ya say ya've got jobs waitin' for ya?" Brett sounded more comfortable now, his fears put to rest while the other man's openness seemed to have erased his doubts about playing the role of inquisitor. In this one case, anyway.

"Yeah, I got a job waitin' for me in _____ if I want it," Gary gave the name of that port city which lay a few hours away. "And I'm sure I can get one for Gabo, too. So we just need

enough money to get there is all, along with enough to live on till our first paycheck comes through.”

“And ya don’t have anything now? Nothin’?”

“Not any cash. Cause like I got some money in this savings account back east, but I can’t get at it around here cause it’s outa state.”

“And what? You’re plannin’ on transferrin’ it out here once ya reach ____?” Brett repeated the name of that port city.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Well shoot, man. Don’t ya know that we’re in the same state right here? So ya can start transferrin’ that account while you’re still here in town if ya want to, and that way ya can get at it that much quicker. Before ya even reach ____ if ya want to”

“Yeah, ya know, you’re right about that. I never thought of it.” Gary sounded as though a light had just come on in his head. His problem solved all at once, or at least the path to that solution having been laid out for him by this man. This leader! This natural-born leader.

And what about me? Gabo wanted to ask even as the others droned on about transferring accounts. So impressed by the quick solution and the leadership qualities Brett had just shown that he could hardly wait for his own turn to come. His chance to jump into line behind a real leader at last. A decisive leader after the weeks of drift and directionlessness which he had just been suffering through. Cornelius and then Gary, those two guys who couldn’t lead their way out of a wet paper bag, or whatever the expression is.

“What about me?” Gabo seized the first opportunity that presented itself, the first lull in the conversation. “What should I do?”

“You...?” Brett sounded surprised at the sudden question from a man who had spoken to him so little over the last few days.

“Yeah, cause I wanta go to Hawaii, or at least California where I can get a ship easy. I don’t wanta go to _____,” he cringed slightly as he threw out the name of that dreaded city.

“But I thought you two guys were together.”

“No, not us. We’re only together for a week or something,” Gabo looked only at Brett as he spoke, avoiding any glimpse in Gary’s direction since he knew from experience just how awkward these change-of-leadership moments could be. “And I don’t wanta go to...” He couldn’t bring himself to say it again.

“Ya don’t?” The new leader looked over at the old one while Gabo’s eyes refused to follow. “Jeez, I don’t know what I can tell ya.”

Anything, Gabo pleaded in silence. Anything at all.

“Cause even if ya got money in the bank, it’s not gonna do ya any good transferrin’ it out to this state. So ya gotta... I don’t know. Don’t ya got anyone that can help ya? Like... You know, family...?”

“My family? No, they’re all out at sea right now,” Gabo replied while asking himself at the same time why that previous leader of his hadn’t thought of that one. Why he had never said a word about it.

“All of em?” Brett sounded incredulous at the reply. “Every single one of em?”

“Yeah.” His father and his brothers and even his brother-in-law. Every one of them. Except for the women, that is. Mama and... Mama!! She was there. She could help! And she probably could have helped him a long time ago if only that other guy had thought of it. She could... She could... Wait a minute. How could she help him when she was in Honolulu and he was all the way over here? How could she...?

Brett knew how! As Gabo discovered moments after mentioning his mother. Brett knew exactly how. So that no sooner had the young seaman spoken than the old cowboy—the new leader—was starting in on a series of instructions. He was telling Gabo to call his mother and have her wire the money to the local Western Union where he could pick it up the next time he was in town. Enough money to get him out of there and back to where he wanted to be. Back to the islands, or at least to California where he still had a week or so left on his shipping-card, so that the first job that came up...

And Gabo was feeling so relieved all at once as he saw that pathway home being opened up for him, he was feeling so liberated from his burdens, that no sooner had Brett finished speaking than his emotions came bursting out. “Family! Good old family. Cause that’s what it’s all about, right?”

“Yeah...”

“I mean, without family, where are you? You’re nowhere, that’s where. You’re all alone. Cause family, man. Family!”

On and on Gabo gushed as thoughts of home and family filled his head. On and on as Brett turned to look away and Gary shifted about uncomfortably in his chair. On until finally Miss Kay broke in. “Would ya like some coffee or anything, Mr. Donnelly?” she asked with unaccustomed formality as she got to her feet. “Would any of ya like coffee?”

Back in the bunkhouse that evening, Gabo felt a level of unease around his soon-to-be-former partner such as he had never felt around anyone before. Because while changes of leadership were never simple things to deal with, this one was by far the most difficult and complex that he had ever experienced. Having to drop a man who he actually liked in a certain way, and one to whom he probably owed a little something after all the help the guy had given him back in Nevada. The hotel and the meals and the other little things. And then on top of that there was the fact that rather than making the clean break that he normally did, walking off all at once never to see the guy again, he still had to spend time around this one. That evening and the days to come until he could finally collect his money and make good his escape.

He had to spend the nights with his former leader, sharing a room which had come to feel so claustrophobic by then that he would lie down from the moment he arrived and try harder than ever to blot out all conscious awareness with sleep, and during the days he had to work full-time alongside the big man. Saturday and Sunday as well since only Miss Kay took the day off to attend church and visit her family while everyone else stuck around and worked. Gary and Gabo who spent both days fixing buildings and fences like they had done on every previous day, though as they worked together now, they hardly spoke to each other at all. Gary never said a word that wasn't along the lines of business, it seemed, while as for Gabo, he had no idea what to say—or why he would want to say it—his thoughts so focused upon Monday as they were. Focused upon the day of his coming deliverance.

“Ya think we oughta hit the bank or the Western Union first?” Brett asked as the pickup truck made its way into town that morning.

“Western union!” Gabo spoke up quickly with an assertiveness that surprised even himself. Too anxious to get his money and get out of there to worry about any of the social niceties. Because the sooner he caught a bus to California, the sooner he would be able to get on with his life. To go down to the hall and use that killer-card of his on the first decent job that came up, a ship and a payoff somewhere down the line and enough money to take him back home at last. Back to that life on the islands which he never should have left in the first place.

As the two men dropped him off at the bus-station, he thanked Brett for all the help while doing his best not to look Gary's way. Unsure what to say in a situation like that, with a guy who had helped him in some ways though hurt him in others with the complete lack of leadership he had shown over the last couple of weeks. His performance in that area so bad that it would have earned him the coldest possible goodbye had he been a Mate. A quick wave and a, “Seeya.” Though now in this case, with a guy who had been his friend as well as his leader—and a kind and generous friend at that—Gabo knew that he had to say something more. He had to say... What? How could he say thank you to a guy who had led him into the worst days of his entire life?

Oh, how he wished he were back on a ship right then. Back where it would be so easy to sneak off without a word. No awkward anything, just a quick disappearing act. A blink and I'm gone.

As Gabo finished his thank yous to Brett, the old cowboy stuck out his hand to shake, followed shortly by Gary's big paw. “Good luck to ya,” the big man said as their two hands met. “Hope ya get yourself a ship right away.”

“Yeah, good uh... Good luck...” he muttered back without meeting the guy's eyes.

“And you stay away from them gamblin' tables, too, ya hear!” Gary added in a strange half-authoritarian, half-joking tone. “You hold onto your money instead-a throwin' it away like that.”

Me!? Gabo wanted to yell back all at once as the man's words hit some soft, defensive spot. That sudden accusation from someone who had never said a word about it before. Me!!?

When it was you who talked me into all that gambling stuff. You! Because I never gambled before I met you, so it was all your idea. It was all...

“Seeya,” he said at last, a quick wave of the hand before turning away without a look back.

Without another thought as he made his getaway. Left behind all the misery and hardship of the last week, the aimless wandering of the week before, as he set out on the first leg of his long journey home. A bus and a hotel room and a ship to far off lands and finally an airplane ride back to paradise. Back to those islands which had never seemed so beautiful or so inviting as they did now.

PART IX

ACTION

ENTER GABRIELA

Gabriela was none of the things that people said about her. She wasn't fiery or hot-blooded or any of the other stereotypes, and she wasn't strong and independent as claimed by those who liked her, cold-hearted and manipulative as claimed by those who didn't. No, she was far from those things, any of them. She was a woman of great sensitivity instead. A romantic who believed in love above all else.

She believed in true love with the right man. Believed it was possible to find such a love since she had known it in her own life. Lived it and felt it for years. Until tragedy struck. She also believed in the love of family, the love between parents and children which is passed along to each succeeding generation. While even more than that what she believed in was the love of her sisters. Love and solidarity and support in times of need.

She trusted those sisters more than anyone else she had ever known or would ever know, the group of them so close while growing up, so cohesive as to become something of a local legend in the South American city in which they were raised. Estela and Cristina and Beatriz and Marta and finally Gabriela, the youngest and prettiest of the Aguirre sisters according to most observers, though it was a close-run thing. That group of siblings which always formed such a solid block socially and morally and intellectually that they would soon become the center of gravity in any school they attended, their influence growing as their numbers grew with the passing years. And then as they matured and entered young adulthood one by one, it wasn't long before they came to dominate their neighborhood in the same way that they had with their schools. The center of attention whenever present, a point of reference when gone.

And they were all so polite and well-behaved that they ruffled few feathers, even the local nags having little to say against them despite the way in which every masculine eye would be drawn their direction whenever they appeared on the scene. Too nice and well brought up to think anything bad about them, the old ladies would say, too respectable. As meanwhile the men would say little, only their expressions revealing their true thoughts, their impossible dreams as they watched all those graceful, attractive young women go by. So tempting yet so far out of reach, both the men and the women agreed. Too good and too nice of girls for any of those men ever to touch.

And yet despite the reputation they enjoyed as prim and proper young ladies, the sisters were constantly pushing the local social limits in their own subtle way. They were speaking their minds in ways rarely heard around there from members of their gender, though doing so in such pleasant and inoffensive tones as to invite no backlash. Speaking quietly yet insistently in something of a low-key struggle for their right to think for themselves and to do as they pleased.

And to nudge that culture of theirs ever so gently toward the modern world of the seventies, just as their mother had long been doing at home.

Their mother who was so convinced of the superiority of her gender that she saw no reason ever to discuss it with men, not with her husband and not with anyone else. Only with her daughters to whom she would repeat her pet phrases almost as though they were mantras. Remember that it was women who created civilization, women who created culture, so that when you try to compete with men in a male sort of way, you're actually lowering yourself to their standards. You're behaving as though you were a member of the inferior gender when you should be using your feminine brain instead. You should be out-smarting them and out-maneuvering them at every turn.

Or in other words the sisters should be running the world—or at least the neighborhood—in the same way that their mother ran the house. With no fuss and no fury, but rather with subtlety and insight. Calmly having her way even when her husband would bluster away in one of his periodic fits of machismo. Not taking the bait and responding in kind thanks to her seemingly infinite patience as instead she would wait him out, wait for his tantrum to run its course. Her words few but pointed and quietly effective, with every sound she uttered being designed to bring him around to her own way of thinking though to do so without his knowledge. So that as he would puff himself up at the end and make his final pronouncement on the subject at hand, he would have no idea of the fact that the position he was stating was almost invariably that which his wife had espoused from the beginning.

That was how things always seemed to work out with the little daily questions around that house of theirs. And then when it came to the bigger questions that played themselves out over longer time-frames, the wife's eventual victory could be taken as even more of a foregone conclusion. The husband steadily giving ground, such as he did on what had to be one of the biggest questions of all: the question of their daughters' futures. That question on which he had declared from the moments of their births that no daughter of his would ever work for a living, declared it just as his father had done with his sisters years before, as his father's father had done. Repeating that worn out phrase about their only goal in life being to find and marry the right men. Wealthy men who could support them in style while perhaps at the same time providing their father with certain social and business connections.

Because while that may have been his initial position, his views were to evolve ever so slowly with the passage of time and the quiet coaxing of his wife. To grow softer by the day, or at least by the year, until by the time the oldest of the girls were entering their teens, he was telling his wife that of course his daughters should join the workforce once they finished school. Of course they should go out and make their own lives for a few years. Until they managed to find the right husbands. They should work at some appropriately female profession, that is, something like secretary or nurse, or perhaps they could work as teachers like what their mother had done years before. Because after all, that job of hers hadn't prevented her from meeting and marrying the right man when he came along, had it? A highly eligible man and one who at the time hadn't been afraid to take on the parental disapproval which he knew would come his way with his decision to marry a woman who worked for a living. So of course his daughters could work as well. Of course they could. For a few years at least.

And then by the time that the moment of truth made its arrival at last, by the time the girls ceased to be girls and grew into women one by one, their father's views had evolved so completely as to bear no hint of his initial position. Echoing his wife's position almost to the letter as he insisted that not only would it be acceptable for them to go out and get jobs, but that in fact they had better do so. They had better go to work and get out of his house and learn to support themselves. And when it came to the nature of the jobs that his daughters went after, he no longer had a word to say. He never blinked an eye when informed one day that one of his daughters had decided to become a businesswoman in her own right, not a secretary but the boss with secretaries of her own. And he showed no signs of shock or even surprise when told that another daughter had decided to become a scientist. "Oh, these modern girls," was all he said. "This modern day and age." And the question of their finding rich and eligible young men? He seemed to know by then that it was best to say nothing, best not to broach the topic at all, as far outnumbered as he was.

And so it was without parental opposition that the Aguirre sisters went off to make lives of their own as they came of age, the businesswoman and the scientist and the others as well. Until finally it came to Gabriela, the youngest and least adventurous of them all and the one who surely would have been voted least likely to leave home had such a vote ever been held. So timid and conformist that as she surveyed her future prospects, she never looked beyond the old list of "female" careers which her father had outlined years before. Eventually choosing the job of secretary from that list before hiring on with a company which was located mere blocks from her family home and then settling in at that position where she hoped to live out the quiet and boring life to which she aspired. Safe and protected and surrounded by family. So that had it not been for a certain man who entered her life one day...

Roy was his name, a North American man who came into the office where she worked and suddenly changed everything. Tall and handsome and so exotic in his own way that as she looked him over, she felt almost like she was seeing someone from another world. A hero from a movie who had somehow come to life before her eyes. Because everything about him was so much bigger than the narrow little world of her previous experience that she felt herself being drawn toward him in a way that she never would have thought possible. Drawn so inexorably that before the day was over, she had made a decision which was to change the entire direction of her life. To change it so dramatically that within a matter of weeks not only was that least likely of the Aguirre sisters to leave her home, but in fact she was to leave the entire continent as well. Setting out on what would be a whole new life in the United States.

Setting out to be with Roy who was something of a self-made man, resolute and determined and with the sort of dominant personality that so appealed to Gabriela at the time. A man who always seemed to know exactly where he was going and what he was doing. His vision so clear, his entire life so clear, that she couldn't help but say yes when he asked her to come along and make that happy, secure life of his into her own life. So that the question of love...?

It was hard to say what she felt for him in those early days, so powerful he was in every way that she felt herself being swept away more than anything else. He was physically powerful, big and strong, while his personality seemed to fill any room he entered, commanding the respect of everyone he met. And at the same time he could be so sweet and gentle when he spoke to her alone, so thoughtful that she felt flattered by every word he said. Seduced by every small

courtesy and ready to follow wherever he might lead. Ready to overlook the drawbacks as well: the age difference and that previous marriage of his about which she was soon to learn—marriage and divorce and children as old as her.

Because older? He was so much older that the difference was more easily measured in decades than in years. And the difference had been so obvious from first sight that had he made his approach to her that day in any way other than the quiet, respectful way he did, she surely would have turned him down flat. Had he tried to come on to her rather than simply offering her a job as he initially did, telling her that he needed a secretary who was fluent in Spanish while brushing aside any questions about the weakness of her English language skills. Had he tried to proposition her in any way whatsoever, making the romantic aspect of their relationship overt rather than implied, she never would have said yes no matter how intense the attraction may have been.

She never would have agreed to go with him to that strange northern city whose name she barely recognized. To work for him there, perhaps to love him and live with him. Who could say? Because all she knew for sure as she left for that new world was that he had a job waiting for her at the business he owned, the container terminal which he had been building up for years, he told her more than once. Building with nothing but his own two hands.

Roy had been involved in the shipping industry in one way or another throughout his life, first as the son of a man who worked in it and then as an employee in his own right from the time he left school. And while he may never have spent a day working aboard ship, over the course of the years he had held down virtually every other position that there was to be had in the industry. Everything from planning the cargoes and scheduling the voyages to provisioning the vessels and crews to maintaining and repairing the ships themselves. And in fact there had even come a point when he was still a young man that he had tried to set up and run a company of his own, picking up a couple of old surplus World War II ships and trying to break into the tramp bulk-cargo trade. Trying but failing within a few short years. Though despite the rapid demise of that first great entrepreneurial effort of his life, still he had kept the dream alive within him, the dream of someday starting a company of his own and becoming his own boss.

He had kept those hopes alive and kept his eyes open as well until finally as the shift toward containerization began to gather steam, as it came to look more like a revolution and less like a fad with each passing day, he had said to himself that this was it. This was his chance for independence at last, his chance to get in on the ground-floor of a whole new industry. Or at least it was his chance to get in on one of the lower floors, he had soon gone on to himself as he noticed how some of the big, established companies were already starting to make the transition themselves. A fairly low floor, he had told himself months later, a year later as his search for financial backing had gone on and on, and as he had seen prime opportunities slip away one by one. The big East Coast ports and the California ports as well, so that over time he had been forced to revise his plans and revise them again. Forced to look ever further afield and try to find some port in a secondary market where it would still be possible to get in on the local ground-floor.

And Roy hoped that he had found just such a place as the long-awaited money had come through at last, a certain port located along the northerly part of the West Coast that was big

enough to where it had plenty of potential, though as yet there wasn't a single container terminal in sight. Nothing but old break-bulk terminals such as the one that had caught his eye during the visit he paid there some months earlier, beautifully situated and practically begging to be converted, while given the fact that it sat idle most of the time, he had been sure that the asking price would be reasonable.

So Roy had snatched up that dock as soon as he had the money in hand, and then he had set out to make the necessary improvements. Architects' plans and permits and environmental studies and more permits. Papers and time and effort and money. Whatever it took to turn his vision into a reality, into the brand new container terminal which had slowly taken shape over the coming months. The old warehouses knocked down and replaced by rows of container parking. Repair shops and garages and offices built, while at the same time the quay itself had been reinforced and crane tracks installed. Everything made ready for that great final step in which the huge new container cranes had been brought in and set up.

But then while the terminal may have been finished and ready for business once the cranes were up and running, all the other equipment in place, unfortunately the business hadn't been ready for it. Not yet anyway. With container companies still so few and far between at the time that Roy's search for clients had come up empty throughout the construction phase. Continued to come up empty in the months that followed as he had struggled to keep the place going on zero income. Struggled and worried and pinched what pennies he could until at last he had met with his first success, signed up his first client, an old-time foreign carrier which had long served that part of the country and which had just made the decision to convert its operations. And then with the passage of still more time, months, a year, with the containerization revolution shifting into high gear at last, he had managed to sign up a second client as well, one of those newly converted companies which were suddenly starting to sprout up everywhere. He had signed up a third company a short time later and even a fourth, all the clients he could handle as he had watched his balance sheet take a radical turn for the better. Watched as the losses had finally become profits and as those profits had soon begun to soar, to grow bigger and bigger with each passing day.

So big in fact that almost before he knew what was happening, the big-money boys had made their descent, appearing from out of nowhere with offers to buy him out. Offers which may have been generous in some cases, more than generous, though still Roy had turned them down one after another, explaining more than once that his goal had never been to make money with this thing. It had been to make a company, to build something which he could call his own. And he had been so adamant in his refusals that soon those would-be investors had been obliged either to give up or else to change their tactics, with a couple of the most determined among them going so far as to try an end-run by seeking out other people who they hoped might be more reasonable. Reasonable according to their own definition of that term. They had sought out those financial backers of Roy's who had provided him with capital and who at that point still owned a stake in the company which most of them were more than ready to cash in on. Ready to take the money and run.

And so given such incentive, those backers of his had soon begun to apply pressure. So much pressure over the coming weeks that finally Roy had been forced to back down, forced to give in, though only on his own terms as he informed them at the moment of surrender. Telling

his erstwhile partners that while he was willing to sell the dock itself, he refused to hand over the management of day-to-day operations. Refused to sell to any company that wouldn't agree to keep him on in a very direct way, not simply by hiring him as the manager, but instead by signing a contract with the management company which he was already in the process of spinning off. A new company to be wholly owned by him.

Nobody seemed to like the idea when they first heard it, nobody but Roy that is, though eventually one of the multinational conglomerates bidding on the terminal had agreed to his terms. It had agreed to pay off Roy's financial backers and then sign the contract which he'd had drawn up. An iron-clad contract, his lawyer had told him. One that not only gave him a great deal of autonomy but also made it virtually impossible for anyone to dump him without his full consent. So that as far as the operations around the terminal were concerned, everything had continued on exactly the same as it had been before, with Roy still running the show while his employees had kept their jobs. The only change being the name of the company on their paychecks as now it was Roy's management company that appeared there. The name of that company which was even more his own than what the previous one had been.

And so it was that as his fifties ticked slowly by, Roy found that he had become a success at last. A true success in his professional life, though the same could hardly be said about his personal life. With no woman there to share his success, no one to greet him when he returned to his cold, empty house each night. Having been much too busy over recent years to have met anyone, he told himself whenever the thought came up. Too busy and perhaps too fearful as he recalled the way his first marriage had ended in such a bitter, angry divorce years before. An experience so horrific as to make anyone shy, unwilling to risk a repetition. So that had it not been for one of those strange twists of fate that sometimes come along in people's lives, a lightning bolt which had struck him in the heart all at once...

It happened during a business trip he made one year to a series of port cities in South America, visiting the offices of various shipping companies in an effort to drum up future business for his terminal, when upon entering one particular office he had met a certain secretary. A woman so beautiful that he had been unable to take his eyes off her. Lustrous dark hair and green eyes that seemed to sparkle with life and one of the most perfect bodies he had ever seen. And then when their eyes had met for the first time, her entire face had lit up with such a big and spontaneous and oh-so-inviting smile that he was never quite sure afterwards that his jaw hadn't dropped open at the sight. The others in the room had quickly faded from his vision as he walked over and began to speak, began to make stumbling attempts at Spanish which she answered in her limited English. And though the resulting conversation might have been one that would have sounded like a comic mishmash to the outside observer, none of that had mattered to Roy at the time since for him there had been only the two of them in the room that day. Only the two of them in the entire world.

And Roy had been so overwhelmed by the sight and the emotions that raced through him that the only thing he had known for certain was that he had to find some way to bring her into his life, some way to extend that moment for months or years. For a lifetime. Though what could he say? he had wondered as even his English seemed to falter. How could he propose something like that to such a proper Catholic girl as she appeared to be? So obviously the product of a good home. What could he say that wouldn't be too forward, too insinuating? What besides offering

her a job under whatever pretext he could invent off the top of his head, he had decided in the end. Asking her to come work for him at his terminal, begging her to come and refusing to accept any answer but yes. Brushing aside her maybes and her, "*Debo pensar*," until at last he had heard that word. That, "Yes," which she had finally said in a sweet and innocent yet at the same time open and honest tone. That, "Yes," which had sent a thrill through his body such as he had never felt before. That, "Yes," which was to change both their lives forever.

Within weeks of Roy's departure, Gabriela was on her way from her warm southern home to join him in that cold northern country of his. Weeks during which she had changed her mind and decided to call the whole thing off at least once a day, only to be brought back around and re-convinced by one sister or another. "Go ahead and take a chance." "Try it for awhile. What do you have to lose?" "Go out and live your life for once." All of them so sure, so insistent that in the end she went through with it. She went to the airport and said her goodbyes, full of trepidation and doubts about the new life that lay ahead. The new country, the new man.

And it was only at the sight of Roy that her doubts ever began to subside. Seeing that big man standing there as she walked out of the customs area, a bouquet of flowers in his hand and a smile on his face that lit her up inside, made her want to run over and throw herself into his arms. Though as the two of them drew near, he seemed to stiffen and hold back, making no move to hug her and none to kiss her as instead he reached out his hand in a tentative sort of way, offering a handshake along with the flowers. And then even after a trip in his car and a dinner at what he claimed to be the best restaurant in town, followed by a quick tour of the apartment which he had lined up for her, still there was no kiss. Nothing but a goodbye handshake which felt even more awkward than what the earlier one had. Roy still holding back for some unexplained reason rather than reaching out to steal that virginity of hers which was so ready to be surrendered at that moment. Because while Gabriela may have been "saving herself" as the old-fashioned expression goes, it had never been for marriage. It had always been for love, for true love. She had simply been waiting to meet a man to whom she could "give herself" completely, without hesitation, without a doubt in her heart.

But Roy never took advantage of that fact, not on the first day they were together and not on the second or third. Strictly hands off as he took her out to dinners at fancy restaurants, gave her gifts and compliments delivered in shy tones, the complete opposite of the self-assured attitude he always displayed at work, as though he were afraid when he spoke that his words might offend her somehow. And then as the end of each evening arrived, there would be the inevitable handshake at the door before Gabriela turned to go inside and spend another lonely night in that strange apartment in that strange city in that strange country. The same thing night after night, awkward goodbye after awkward goodbye, until finally Gabriela could take it no longer. Finally a night came when she ignored the extended hand and threw herself at him instead, grabbed him and kissed him and dragged him inside the apartment with her. Taking the initiative in a way that she never had before, not in anything she had done, and making a leap at that moment into a whole new way of life. A new way of being such that nothing would ever be quite the same again.

Within days Roy was moving in to live with her full-time, losing his fear of offending her so quickly that his shyness and hesitation seemed to disappear overnight, the real Roy to emerge in all his glory. The powerful Roy, the dominant Roy. That man Gabriela had dreamed about in

her own girlish way over so many years. The one who had always seemed so attractive from a distance, until now as she began to see him up close. Now as she began to see the reality behind that dream.

Because suddenly as she found herself living with a flesh-and-blood version of her dream-come-true, she the newly independent and assertive Gabriela, she came to realize at last why it was that none of her sisters had ever shared her enthusiasm for dominant men. Some of them so repulsed that they had said they would rather be dead or suffer some equally horrible fate instead, and all of them eager to listen to the lessons which their mother had taught over the years about how to deal with men of that sort. All of them but Gabriela. The only one to have ignored that motherly advice, thinking at the time that she knew better and saying that she saw nothing wrong with letting a man run her life. Not until now, that is. Now as she came face-to-face with just such a man and just such a life.

And it didn't take more than a few barked orders on the part of Roy before she was calling up one sister after another in search of that long-lost counsel, trying to play catch-up at that late date and to learn a few of those feminine skills which could make her present life more pleasant. She called her sisters only to be told again and again that if she really wanted to learn how to deal with that new man of hers, she should go straight to the source. She should talk to their mother and bring her into this thing despite Gabriela's own reservations about doing so. Despite the fact that she knew it would mean having to admit to all the half-truths she had been telling about her move to the United States.

Having to confess, as she did on the day when she finally gave in to that sisterly pressure and made the call, that the move had involved more than a simple job offer. Just as her mother had suspected all along, she was surprised to hear in reply. And then as her mother asked about the man involved, soon she began to tell about Roy, leaving out only the parts about his age and his marital status. She gave a description of his job and his lifestyle and especially of his alpha male personality before going on to beg for a repetition of that old advice which she had so blithely ignored in the past.

That advice which was to turn the tide at last as she learned over the coming days and weeks just how to push back, how to deal with her man in the way that an Aguirre woman should. Not by confronting Roy head on but instead by using quieter, more subtle methods, some of them so subtle that he never knew what hit him, thinking that he was getting his own way when in fact it was hers. She learned how to win the small battles that came up in that shared life of theirs, to win most of them anyway, though there was one ongoing battle in which she found it impossible to make headway. One of the biggest battles of all. Because no matter how hard she tried, it seemed like there was no way to convince that stubborn man to take no for an answer when he asked her to marry him, as he did every few days from the moment he moved in. Telling her that he wanted to, "make an honest woman of her," and repeating himself so often that he frightened her a bit, unprepared as she was to take such a drastic step with a man she had known for so short a time. Unprepared even to consider it, let alone to quit her job and live off him as he offered with even greater frequency. Not when she actually enjoyed the time she spent working at the terminal, enjoyed it as much as she abhorred the idea of spending her long, boring days sitting around at home alone.

Because there was something about the place that she liked right from the beginning, that place whose atmosphere was built so much in Roy's own image. Friendly and generous and warm in its embrace, even if things were pretty retrograde on a social level, with its clearly defined roles for men and women only then in the early stages of breaking down. She liked working there, and she liked the people she met, many of them kind and thoughtful while a few were even funny. And then there was one woman in the office who always went out of her way to help Gabriela with her English lessons, correcting her in such gentle and encouraging ways that the language barrier seemed to grow lower by the day. Seemed to disappear in rapid stages, in fact, as Gabriela displayed a talent for language which she had never before realized that she had. Her progress so fast that within a few short months she was already speaking English as well as most of those who surrounded her. Better than some.

So then why should she be in a hurry to change all that? To marry that big and pushy and sometimes frustrating man, though that man whose heart was in the right place for all that. Kind and thoughtful in his own way and his own time, and the best lover that any woman could ever want, so that if only he would stop pestering her, stop asking her to marry him every few days as the weeks and months wore on. Asking her and asking her... Until finally one day she gave in and said yes at last, worn down by all those months of unrelenting pressure. Or then again, perhaps it was the thought of the baby that had finally brought her around, the potential baby. Because while she may not have been pregnant just yet, it was only a matter of time before she would be given all the sex that the two of them were having. And as visions of that baby came into her head, visions of the shock to her parents when told that she was the mother of an illegitimate child, suddenly their shock at hearing that she was marrying a divorced man seemed to pale in comparison. The far lesser of two evils.

And the two of them were very happy together in the months that followed their wedding, with Roy going so far in his efforts to please her as to buy a big house with a view of the water which Gabriela had fallen in love with at first sight. The perfect place for the sort of future that she envisioned, she had thought. Children running around the yard and loving parents watching them play and happiness, contentment. So that as they began to settle into their new home, the only thing left to do was to wait and let nature take its course.

To wait and wait as the months rolled by without success, Gabriela's maternal status unchanged while her patience slowly waned and her curiosity grew, and while she asked herself with greater and greater frequency what could possibly be wrong. Whenever she tried to discuss the matter with Roy, however, he would simply say, "Don't worry about it," or change the subject or do both. So unhelpful that Gabriela was soon forced to conclude that it was up to her and her alone to seek out a solution. Up to her to begin timing her cycles and making sure that they never missed one of her peak days, though even that effort failed to produce the desired results. It failed to break the string of infertile months that continued to roll on one after another, clear through the first year of marriage and well into the second. Clear to the point where she knew at last that she had to take the next step and bring in medical help. Had to go to a clinic where she took a whole series of fertility tests, all of which came out positive, while at the same time she set up a similar visit for Roy. And it was only then, only when she told him about his appointment, that ever the truth was revealed. Only then that he informed her about a vasectomy which he'd had performed years before. One that made it impossible for him ever to father her children, and one about which he had been withholding information all along.

Oh, how that admission struck her! How the anger came welling up from deep inside that day in a way that it never had with Roy before. Her sense of such utter betrayal. Though it wasn't the vasectomy that bothered her so much. No, that was something that couldn't be helped since it was far in the past. It was the lies and deception that ate at her instead. It was the fact that he had known all along but had never bothered to tell her. That was what hurt the most, and that was the thing she would never be able to forget. It wasn't the crime, it was the cover-up, as any member of the Nixon White House can tell you.

With that revelation of his, their marriage entered into what were to be its darkest days. A time when she came within a hair's breadth of leaving him and moving back to South America, her bags all packed and the reservations made only to be canceled at the last minute. Remade and re-canceled a few days later as rather than moving south physically, she spent hours and hours on the telephone, discussing the matter with whatever sister had the time to listen. And in the process she ran up such a huge bill that Roy would have hit the ceiling had he dared to complain. Had he dared to do anything but keep his mouth shut and stay out of her way in the daytime while spending his nights alone. Waiting for weeks, for months. Waiting for her anger to subside at last.

And then even as she finally cooled off and they began to speak once again, still Gabriela's pain was so raw that she knew it would never heal completely. Knew that while she might go on living with that man and loving him as a wife loves her husband, still she would never forgive him for what he had done. Never!

As for Roy, it was clear from his comportment that he could sense the fact that the new and frigid air which had entered their relationship wouldn't be going away anytime soon. Clear from the way he would tread more lightly than ever before when in her presence, the way he would keep his voice low and wait for her to take the lead in the things they did together. Wait for her to propose a dinner out or a night on the town, her to initiate any love-making sessions as well. And he seemed to make a conscious effort never to mention the words child or children around her, as though trying to avoid the subject at all costs.

The man paying penance for his act of deception, a penance that went on and on for month after month as Gabriela's anger continued to ebb ever so slowly. On even as the third year of their marriage drew near. With Roy largely seen-but-not-heard around the house until finally one day when his confidence in his slow-moving redemption appeared to have reached a breaking point. Strong enough at last to where he dared to take the lead in a conversation for the first time in all those months, dared to speak up that day and broach a whole new subject, or at least to revive an old one which the two of them had discussed off-and-on over the time they had been together. It was a plan which had originally been proposed by one of them, Gabriela was never quite sure which, so that it had always had the air of being a mutual project. A mutual dream. Brought back to life now by Roy at the very moment when they were so in need of something of the sort, some reason-to-be for a couple that would remain forever childless. He brought up that old dream of theirs about getting a boat and sailing it around the world.

A boat which in this case wasn't going to be just any old boat, however. Not with Roy being Roy. No, it was going to be a sailboat to end all sailboats, a great big schooner which he'd had his eye on for some time, evidently. One that was well over a hundred feet in length, with

three masts and a crew's quarters forward and a big, luxurious owner's cabin aft, not to mention the guest cabins in between. A boat—or actually a ship—which Roy rechristened the *Lady G* in honor of a certain woman in his life.

And with the acquisition of that big, beautiful schooner, their marriage and their lives soon entered into a new and happier phase. One that was even happier in its own way than what their early days together had been. With the two of them working at the terminal and then spending their free time getting the *Lady G* ready for the big trip, ready for that day on which they would toss everything else aside as they set out together on their great adventure. Side by side as they sailed off into the sunset...

And it was all going to happen soon, very soon, Roy would say in reply each time that Gabriela asked him about it. As soon as the boat was ready and the time of year was right and he could get a good price for his management company, along with guarantees that his old employees wouldn't lose their jobs, and maybe a good price for the house and a few of their other assets as well since they wouldn't be needing those things anymore. So it would be soon. Very soon.

Until suddenly there came a day when it was too late. A day when Roy told people at work that he wasn't feeling well as he went to lie down on the settee in his office, only to be discovered an hour or two later. Dead. The victim of a stroke so massive that resuscitation efforts were in vain. That big, impressive man gone in an instant, with only a young and still rather innocent widow left behind to deal with the fallout.

Left to struggle as best she could with a fallout which turned out to be far worse than anything Gabriela could have imagined even in her worst nightmares. Because no sooner was her man gone than the vultures began to swoop in one after another, trying to grab whatever they could get from the carcass. People who claimed to have had verbal agreements with Roy and people who claimed that he owed them money and family members so long-estranged that Gabriela had never heard of them before. Cousins and nephews, while at the head of the pack stood the children from his first marriage. Two men and a woman of around Gabriela's own age who had never shown the least interest in their father or his business when he was alive, hadn't spoken or written to him in years. Suddenly eager to renew family ties now that the poor man was dead as the whole group of them came walking back into what had been his life with their hands held out and dollar signs in their eyes, demanding their "rightful inheritance." Urged on from the shadows by their mother, as Gabriela was soon to learn. That woman who prodded them forward while pulling the strings from behind.

Because while Roy's first wife may have been divorced for too many years by then to lay any claim to the container terminal or other assets, she was bound and determined to get those things for her children. And to keep them out of the hands of that little tramp from south of the border, if you know what she means. That little so-and-so who had used sex to have her way. And since that first wife had remarried years earlier to a man who had even more money than Roy, she had all the resources at her disposal, all the high-priced lawyers she would need to get exactly what she wanted. Enough to get every penny that her ex-husband ever had, or at least to make life so miserable for that little gold-digger that she would never dare to show her face in the good old USA again.

And with all the lawsuits and injunctions that were suddenly flying her way, Gabriela was left with no time to grieve, no time to mourn the loss of the man she loved. She had only enough time to set up what she could in the way of a defense. She along with Roy's old-time drinking buddy and long-time lawyer, a kind and friendly old man who unfortunately turned out to be completely outclassed by the army of lawyers on the other side, so far out of his depth that they seemed to run circles around him right from the get-go. Within days they had poked so many holes into Roy's sloppy, do-it-yourself will in which he left everything to Gabriela that to call what remained of that document a sieve would have been overly generous as to its watertight integrity. And then there was the old management contract which Roy had always claimed to be so air-tight, leaking rapidly now as those hot-shot lawyers got their hands on it. As they presented briefs and filed motions and slapped on injunctions that barred Gabriela from the premises and left her powerless. Left the company under the control of no one, as far as she could tell.

The whole situation devolving so rapidly that soon only the house and a small bank account were left untouched and in her hands. Those along with the *Lady G* whose exact status was a bit unclear, though since no actual injunctions were ever filed, Gabriela was able to hold onto that last remnant of her dream—their dream—throughout the process. But that was it. That was all she had anymore, the house and the boat, and her telephone of course. Her lifeline back to her sisters which may have been the only thing that kept her going through the worst days of that long ordeal. Kept her fighting as her life in legal limbo dragged on and on, the months becoming a year with no resolution in sight. And since her small allowance for living expenses wasn't enough to pay for both her phone bills and the upkeep on the *Lady G*, her bank account was sinking fast, sinking steadily toward zero while new lawsuits and injunctions kept popping up as quickly as the old ones could be dismissed. Still popping up even as the second year threatened to become a third.

And while Gabriela may have thought many times about throwing in the towel and letting the whole thing go, moving back to South America and writing off the time she had spent in the United States to experience, still there was something inside her that refused to give up. Some inner strength which she had never been aware of before. A determination to have her way in the end, or more correctly to have Roy's way since what she was fighting for was the honoring of his final wishes, his Last Will and Testament which stated that everything he owned should go to her.

Though how could she ever win? The question nagged at her ever more insistently as the months rolled by. What final victory was possible for someone as badly outgunned as she was on the legal battlefield where the issue was being fought out? What besides a conditional victory? A negotiated settlement, a give and take.

An offer such as the one that she finally put together for those would-be heirs as the second anniversary of Roy's death came and went, as a third year of tribulation began. It was an offer in which she agreed to give up any claim to those things which had meant the least to Roy while holding firm only on the most important. Only on his two great dreams: the terminal management company and the *Lady G*. She told them that they could have everything else, all the stocks and real estate and other investments and even that big family home which by then

had become so lonely for her in Roy's absence. Why they could even have her car if they wanted, as long as they would leave those last two things to her.

And Gabriela's surprise at the moment she heard that the heirs had accepted her offer was exceeded only by her overwhelming sense of relief. By the joy and comfort, the solace she felt at knowing that the long war was over at last and the terminal was back in her hands to stay. It along with the *Lady G* which would have to be her home now that she had nowhere else to live. The floating home of a woman who may have been alone in the world, though she was hardly scared anymore. Hardened now to the realities of life in a way that she had never been before. Strong whether she wanted to be or not. And in fact she had become so strong by that time, so cold in a certain way as well, that her dreamy younger self never would have recognized the woman she had become. Never would have thought such a thing possible.

Though possible she certainly was, a still-young woman only a few years into her thirties who was ready to make her way on her own. Ready to return to that container terminal from which she had been so long absent thanks to all the injunctions over the last couple of years. Ready to assert the authority which had been willed to her by Roy, and ready to straighten out whatever mess she might find there.

Or at least she was ready to try, as she discovered upon her return just how immense that task was going to be. Just how great a state of chaos had come to reign in the terminal during those years without leadership or direction. With so many of the old faces gone that Gabriela hardly recognized the place anymore, filled as it was with all the new faces who had moved in over the last couple of years. New faces who had been hired under whose authority she was never quite sure given the law-of-the-jungle nature of daily life. Because as she looked around on her first day back, the people working there seemed to take orders or ignore them as they saw fit, with no one accountable to anyone about anything. No one responding to the complaints from the shipping companies that were steadily piling up, the threats to pull out and move elsewhere once their contracts expired. No one trying to save the day and steer that operation off the path to oblivion down which it was barreling so rapidly. Not until Gabriela appeared in their midst, that is, determined to salvage what was left though with no experience at running a company and no real idea where to begin.

The first move she made was to talk things over with the people she knew best around the terminal. With O'Hara, an old friend of Roy's who had worked there since day one, still running the cargo planning department even after so many of the others had gone. And then there was Cervone, another old-timer who seemed to be everywhere when it came to maintenance, taking care of the dock itself and the cranes and the rolling stock, the hostlers and top-picks and other equipment used to move containers around the terminal. She talked with them, those two trusted old men, only to discover just how bad the situation actually was. With most of the other experienced people having been run out or having given up and left in disgust, their places taken either by inexperienced newcomers or by people who had risen through the thinning ranks to fill the voids left at the top. People who were up to the jobs in some cases while in others they clearly weren't, with the most glaring example of such a rising incompetent being a guy by the name of Sorensen. A man who had been a small-time rent-a-cop and big-time drunk back when Gabriela had last seen him two years before, but who in the interim had risen to become the head

of all security around the terminal. Still drinking as much as ever while listening to no one and throwing around his newfound weight as he saw fit.

As bad as Sorensen may have been, though, there was another man at that terminal who was even worse, she was soon to learn. A newcomer who seemed to cause more problems than all the others combined. His name was Bowman, and not only was he new to the job, but even the job itself was new, having been created to fill the power-vacuum which had existed over the last couple of years. He had been brought in to run the financial side of things, hired by whoever it was that made decisions of that sort during the injunction years. And since his arrival he had not only taken over most of the business functions which had previously been performed by Roy, but in the process of consolidating his power base, he had done a complete house-cleaning around the office. He had replaced everyone who was there before he came, so that when Gabriela reentered that former workplace of hers after the years of involuntary absence, there wasn't a single person she knew. Nothing but strangers to greet her that day. And then to make matters worse still, she soon discovered that the contract Bowman had signed upon his arrival was more effectively air-tight than anything Roy ever dreamed up, providing him with such a huge golden-parachute were he to be fired that the payment would have bankrupted the company. Which meant that for all intents and purposes, he was there to stay.

There to get in the way as Gabriela tried to take her rightful place at the head of the operation. Tried but failed more often than not, her orders and directives quickly lost in the cacophony of disparate voices that filled the air, vanished without a trace into the jumble of competing departments and leaders and wannabe leaders, each with an agenda of their own. Each going their own way and paying no heed to what she or anyone else had to say. So that had it not been for good old O'Hara and Cervone, there was no telling what might have come of things. O'Hara who saw to it that the ships still got properly loaded no matter what, while Cervone saw to it that the equipment was always there and ready to go. Though beyond that there was little that ever went according to plan, especially not when it came to the so-called special cargoes departments, the hazardous materials and the over-sized loads and other flats in need of extra lashings and the car carriers, not to mention the reefer department where they dealt with the refrigerated containers. Because in all those areas of operation they seemed to lurch from one crisis to another, with some of the people listening to O'Hara while others listened to Bowman and still others listened to no one at all, as far as she could tell.

And there wasn't one of them who would listen to Gabriela when she tried to reestablish her authority, tried every tactic she could think of. Tried some of the subtle, feminine ways which she had learned from her mother only to see them fall flat in the unsubtle environment in which she was forced to operate, even her shouts going unheard by those around her so that whispers came to nothing. And since she had never been the flirtatious type, that class of "womanly wiles" somewhere outside her range, she was left with no choice but to be who and what she was. Fortright and honest, speaking in friendly terms with those she liked, cold-but-correct terms with those she didn't. And all the while she kept growing harder by the day as she learned to hold her feelings in no matter how upset she might have been. Learned to show as little as she could of what she felt on the inside so as to appear that much stronger on the outside.

Though despite all that, despite all the strength that she may have projected, still there were few willing to follow. Only O'Hara and Cervone and some of those who sided with them

making any effort to honor her wishes, while as for Bowman and the others on his side, they seemed to do their best to countermand every order she issued no matter how sensible it may have been. Their resistance so complete and uncompromising as to give the impression that they must have been working on an agenda of some sort, a plan or plans which clearly had nothing to do with the efficient operation of the terminal. Which may in fact have had to do with the exact opposite given the constant disruptions they provoked, as though they stood to gain somehow from all the problems they caused, from slowing things down and losing money left and right. Perhaps even driving the entire company into liquidation in the end, driving it all the way to... Because just think about what would happen if they were to do that, Roy's old unbreakable contract broken at last so that everything would be up for grabs by whoever could scramble most quickly. By Bowman or one of the others who kept a lower public profile... Maybe even by the big conglomerate that owned the dock, that conglomerate for which Bowman and some of the other troublemakers had previously worked and which must have played some role in getting them appointed to their present positions. Perfectly situated now to sow discord and finally to dismember...

No wait a minute, that's going too far. That was Gabriela's paranoia speaking just now. Because she had no idea what was really behind those people's behavior. All she knew was that it made her life miserable over the next year or so as she tried every non-feminine way she could think of to overcome the resistance. She tried confrontation, and she tried divide-and-conquer, tried to buy off a few of the more pliable ones, and she tried reason. All to no avail as the opposition went on without let up, every move she made being met with open defiance or quiet sabotage or being undermined in some other way. Her plans disrupted again and again while her sense of frustration did nothing but grow. A frustration so intense, so all-consuming as to push aside every other thought or sensation, to grow and grow until it seemed to become the only emotion she was capable of feeling anymore. Frustration with the situation at work and frustration with the direction her life was taking and frustration with the state of the world in general. The whole thing spinning so far out of control, spiraling so inexorably downward that finally she could take it no more. Finally she knew that she had to look for some way out, some road to compromise.

Some alternative such as the plan which she was to announce at about the year-and-a-half point in her tenure, telling everyone present that day that she would soon be handing over the day-to-day operations at the terminal to someone else. To a manager to be named later while she would fade into the administrative background. Making a move which she hoped at the time would cause the people working there to rally behind the idea of a new and better organized and more efficient leadership, though as it turned out, the announcement served only to make things worse, if such a thing is possible. It served to bring the infighting and factionalism out of the shadows and into the light of day, into an open warfare that was no longer intermittent or underground but instead became a part of everyday life, a part of every minute or hour spent at the terminal. And the only difference now was the fact that rather than fighting against her, the battles being waged were fought for the evident purpose of gaining her attention and approval. With all those who sought power competing for her favor in naked attempts to become the chosen one.

It didn't take long before the contenders began to coalesce into two main factions, one of them backing O'Hara while the other backed the ambitious and far more aggressive Bowman.

And the only one who continued to go his own way at that time was Sorensen, the last wildcard in the deck who backed no one but himself. And though Gabriela may have leaned toward the O'Hara faction right from the beginning, she knew that the Bowman faction couldn't be ignored, knew that it had to be appeased in some way or other. And so she held off on making her final announcement as she sought some middle path, some way to negotiate a power-sharing agreement between those two men who by then no longer spoke to each other at all.

But then just when she thought that she had come up with such a plan at last, a way to break down barriers and facilitate communications, it was only to see her efforts fail miserably once again. To see them make matters even worse, as always seemed to be the case in that fractious little world. To see the whole thing blow up in her face.

The idea she came up with was for all the leaders and other important players to spend a weekend together in a certain city in Nevada, all expenses paid by her other than the gambling. With nothing to do all day long but to hang out and enjoy themselves and get to know each other better in a new and unfamiliar setting. In a place that was custom-made for friendship rather than rivalry, she hoped. So that if only things had gone according to plan. If only they hadn't taken such a wrong turn from the outset, the tensions growing and growing as the day wore on. Not a pleasantry in sight as the factions spoke to each other ever more exclusively in slurs and insults, and as Gabriela looked on all the while in horror. The lone advocate of peace and understanding in that roiling sea of strife. The lone voice of reason crying out in that wilderness of testosterone-fueled aggression.

And then as though things weren't bad enough already, Sorensen had to go and get sloppy drunk, the big jerk yelling and offending everyone in sight and stirring things back up whenever they threatened to calm down. Pouring gasoline onto the fire at every opportunity until finally one of their arguments broke down into an all-out street brawl.

Oh, what a horrible experience that was! Standing there in the middle of the street while the men all around her shouted and shoved and punched each other, and while she could do nothing but yell at them to stop. Yell in vain at those men who seemed to have gone deaf in their rage. And there is no telling how things might have ended had it not been for that big stranger who appeared from out of nowhere to save the day... Gary, he told her his name was in the bashful way that he spoke afterwards. That man who was even bigger and stronger than what Roy had been, not to mention the fact that he was better looking... Though of course he was no Roy. Not with that shyness of his, that hesitation and that... Though come to think of it, Roy was just as shy when she first met him, wasn't he? He was just as timid. So that maybe... And besides, look at how easily the guy handled Bowman in that fight, not to mention the other man with him, the one they call Tony Baloney. Because that was pretty impressive, wasn't it? The way he... Was it Roy impressive, though? Would you call it Roy impressive? Roy who wouldn't have needed his fists to stop a fight like that, his words, his orders enough to bring those men back into line. So that, no. This guy was no Roy. Not by a long shot, he wasn't. He was... He was still pretty good when you got right down to it, though, wasn't he? Far better than any of the other men she knew, so that maybe, just maybe... If he were to take her up on the job she offered him before they parted that day, if he were to show up at the terminal one of these days, come in to work for her and maybe to straighten a few things out, why then maybe, just maybe... Who knows?

Back at the terminal Bowman was uncharacteristically subdued over the next week or two, as though trying to live down the fact that he who had always bragged about being the toughest man in the area had been defeated so quickly and so decisively by that big man who came butting into their fight. And even on the day that Gabriela announced her decision to appoint O'Hara as manager, acting manager anyway, there to serve until a more permanent manager could be found, the guy took the news in silence. Calmly, stoically. He said nothing and did nothing as he watched his ambitions being quashed. So passive all at once that had it not been for Sorensen and his antics, there would have been little for anyone at the terminal to talk about over those couple of weeks.

That crazy man Sorensen, gone crazier than ever now as he claimed to have seen God in the aftermath of the beating he took that day in Nevada. Claimed that he had suddenly been born again. Though since he remained the dissolute and disreputable character that he had always been, the God of his vision bore little semblance to the Being normally referred to under that Name. The God in his case being One who spoke directly to His newest disciple, spoke continuously and told him every move he should make, according to what that big former drunkard had to say. Told him to push his weird new brand of born-again Christianity until the entire world had been converted, evidently, given the zeal with which the guy soon set out to proselytize. And at the same time, that God of his told him to ignore everything that Gabriela or O'Hara or anyone else had to say, as he announced to all concerned on multiple occasions over the coming days. Informed them that from there on out, he and his department would obey only those orders which came straight from the Supreme Being. Answer only to those auditory hallucinations which Sorensen took for Celestial commands.

It was a big step in the wrong direction as far as Gabriela was concerned, the man trading in his drunken incompetence for blind fanaticism. Though what soon became even more worrisome were the moves made by Bowman as he began to snap out of his post-fight lethargy a short time later, some two weeks after the Nevada trip. Starting with his sudden denunciation one day of what he called O'Hara's "occupation" of the manager's office which the old man had recently moved into. And since one of the new duties which O'Hara had just taken up involved giving orders to the secretaries and others working in the main office, all those people who since their arrival had answered only to Bowman, it wasn't long before they began to echo their formerly undisputed boss's words. Began to resist their new leader's every move with an opposition that seemed to grow more bitter by the day, with name-calling and recommendations that O'Hara, "Get lost!" or that he perform a physically impossible sex act, and finally with open rebellion. Finally with a day on which they changed the locks on the door to the manager's office and refused to let their supposed boss inside no matter what he said or threatened to do.

And then as though things weren't bad enough already, with the main office firmly in the grip of Bowman and his people, O'Hara in exile back at the planning department, the next thing anyone knew that big, ambitious man was moving to extend his reach even further. He was taking advantage of the fact that loyalties had long been divided in the various special cargoes departments by moving in to take them over one after another. Appointing his own people to the top posts and running off anyone who dared to complain while intimidating those who remained, until soon his control had become virtually complete. The reefer department and hazmat and the rest, he had them all. Victory after victory. Though rather than leave him satisfied with all the power he had gained, that string of victories seemed only to whet his appetite for more. To fuel

his ambitions. To stoke them and stoke them some more until within a few short days he was setting his sights even higher. He was moving in on the maintenance department: the crane shop and the motor pool and all the rest. Striking so swiftly and so ruthlessly as to catch Cervone completely off-guard, the man's long-time functions in the hands of Bowman loyalists before he even knew what hit him. His power so rapidly reduced to a mere symbol that by the time the smoke had cleared, Bowman was in effective—if not exactly legal—control of the entire terminal. All of it except for two departments, that is. The cargo planning department where O'Hara continued to reign supreme and the security department where Sorensen went on running things in his own deluded way. But then even as Bowman appeared to have final victory in sight, for some reason he held back. Hesitant all at once before the prospect of taking on that planning office where loyalty to O'Hara ran so deep that there wasn't a single friend of his working there. No one with the experience needed to pull off a smooth transition in that most vital of all terminal operations, so that any attempt at a takeover was bound to lead to major disruptions, with ships being held up while the companies complained. Even the big conglomerate that owned the terminal getting in on the act if things were to go too far.

And so in face of such difficulties, Bowman made no further moves over the next few days, but instead he left the situation to fester as it was. With O'Hara a virtual prisoner in the planning office while Gabriela was still allowed to come and go as she pleased, provided that she didn't complain or try to interfere in any way. Provided that she did nothing but watch and wait, hoping in silence all the while for some sort of relief. Lawsuits and restraining orders off the table given her previous experience with the American justice system, so that if something didn't break her way soon... If Bowman didn't come to his senses at last or if something else didn't happen... If someone new didn't appear on the scene, someone like that Gary person back in Nevada. Walking through the door one day and putting everything right, straightening out that whole... Oh, if only that big man would show his face. If only someone would come to her rescue. Someone! Anyone.

Until that happened, Gabriela could only wait and hope and pray as those difficult days wore on, those fall days of a year which in retrospect would come to be nearly indistinguishable from all the others that preceded or followed it. One year among many in the long years of decline that followed the failure of the Reagan Revolution. Its failure to produce any true prosperity, creating only an illusion of prosperity built upon the shaky foundation of ever-growing debt, both public and private, and its failure to create anything more than an illusion of national renewal and revival. Empty phrases and stage-managed gestures which served only to polarize the nation between those who bought them and those who didn't.

And it was a failure which in many ways seems pre-ordained given the fact that the economic policies of those "revolutionary" years were based upon a series of recycled theories, most of them long devalued. Theories which were "new and fresh" at the time only because their previous failures had been so far in the past as to have been forgotten. Brought back from the death which they had so rightfully earned during their last stint on the leading edge of economic thought only to fail once again in their latest incarnation. To fail so miserably that had it not been for the smoke-screen put up by the debt-fueled "prosperity" of those years, everyone would have been able to see it. Even economists. Even they would have seen the real-world decline outside the prism of their prefabricated theories.

Even the so-called supply-siders who led the charge, fiddling away in their fantasy world of free market Capitalism while the lives of Americans burned. While ironic as it may sound given the name of the economics which they claimed to practice, the supply of American manufactured goods fell at such a precipitous rate as to be in danger of outright extinction. And while the only solution that any of them ever had to offer was more of the same, more of those same policies which had done so little to make things better, so much to make them worse.

More of those one-size-fits-all solutions for the nation's economic woes. More tax cuts and less regulation whether the conditions in the economy were such that those things would help or hurt. And in the process of implementing their policies, they served only to prove what any discerning person should have known from the beginning about the effects of cutting taxes for the already wealthy: that the money would be used to fuel strong, healthy growth during those periods of time when all the other conditions were right, such as they were during the glory years of the dot-com boom, though when the conditions were wrong, most of it would tend to go elsewhere. Or in other words, that the money from those tax cuts would help to produce growth and prosperity precisely at those moments when the economy was least in need of such help, when conditions were such that the growth would have been there in any case, were taxes high or low, while during the intervening years the money would stimulate more phantom growth than anything else. Speculation and financial bubbles.

A growth which was as much a false façade as was nearly every other aspect of that so-called revolution. That second great "revolution" through which the country was forced to suffer in a period of little more than a single generation. That second failed "revolution." The first being the Revolution-for-the-Hell-of-It of the sixties while the second was the Reagan Revolution of the eighties. Both of them such unmitigated failures, both falling so miserably short of their stated goals, that today in retrospect the only valid subject still open to debate has to do with the relative degrees of failure of each. The relative portion of laughter and ridicule that each deserves.

Whether the more farcical of the two was the first or the second. The silly sixties or the delusional eighties. The flash-in-the-pan which came and went within a few short years, leaving behind little more than hairstyles and attitudes and a few bits of slang, or the other whose misreadings of history and economics were to hang over the country like a dark cloud for decades to come. Whether it was the earlier of the two in which an attempt was made at a revolution from the bottom up, making a lot of noise in the process though never achieving control of anything more powerful than the Berkeley City Council before disappearing with hardly a trace, or whether it was the latter, a revolution from the top down with all the consequences that term implies.

A "revolution" which was begun from a position of political power so that the changes it advocated were pushed through at the very beginning of the process, with little debate and even less forethought. Quickly becoming embedded within the political culture of the nation as the structures needed to consolidate and preserve that power seemed to spring up fully-formed overnight. With big money interests jumping on board one after the other, ready to finance the operation far into the future. Ready to buy politicians and pay for so-called think tanks whose only job was to tell their patrons what they wanted to hear. Not to seek out the truth and not to learn from their mistakes or to make the changes to their theories dictated by experience and

common sense. None of that was ever part of their mission. But instead those think tanks were created and financed for the sole purpose of providing lawmakers with justifications for the implementation and preservation of those policies in which their donors believed, or at least those from which they stood to gain financially. There to write authoritative-sounding papers in which the conclusions had already been reached long before the investigation began, the evidence carefully selected so as to make a neat and at least superficially convincing arrival at that pre-determined point. The inevitable demand for more of the same. More one-size-fits-all when it came to economic policy.

And as those think-tankers would go on in that way, encouraging all who would listen to keep doing the same thing again and again, they only managed to avoid that famous old definition of insanity through the fact that, rather than expecting a different result each time those actions were repeated, they would instead re-write past results in such a way as to make each new failure into a fresh new surprise. They would “adjust” history and facts as they went along, explaining away or coming up with excuses for each and every one of their past failures. Simultaneously searching out whatever favorable factoids they could find, seizing upon them and twisting them into the desired shape while overlooking everything else that went in contra, until finally they would turn those failures into successes. They would prove to their own satisfaction, if to that of few others outside their particular orbit, that their policies actually *had* worked at the time, despite what the rest of the world may have to say on the matter. So that had it not been for this thing or that thing or the other...

And since the conservative coalition which came to power in the early eighties and then went on to dominate the American political debate for decades to come demonstrated that same combination of intellectual intransigence and disregard for facts in all areas of its thinking, while at the same time the other side of the debate suffered from a near-total lack of vision, lack of courage, the country had nowhere to go but down in those years, those decades. With the “liberal consensus” of the nation’s glory years having been irrevocably broken in the first “revolutionary” wave, but with no viable alternative brought in to replace it. Nothing but a whole series of distractions, cultural and political, which served mainly to draw people’s attention away from the unpleasant truth about their new regime. To conceal the fact that those “new” economic policies of theirs failed again and again, that they actually made life worse rather than better for the vast majority of the people who supported them, as instead they kept most of their rhetoric focused upon other, entirely unrelated issues. Hot-button issues designed to stir up any would-be culture-warriors within their ranks, red-meat issues for the redneck-wing.

Nothing but a polarization such as the country had rarely experienced in the past, a division which grew deeper and deeper over time as the country sank into what would prove to be decades of paralysis, political and economic and social and moral. A downward spiral which looked like it might go on forever. While the only thing that the country still had going for it at the time was the fact that it had been at such a high point, with so many deep-seated strengths back when it all began, that even as low as it fell during those long decades of decay, still there was farther to go. Still there were founts of resilience and resolve. Total collapse never more than a vague specter somewhere off in the distance.

Or at least there was no danger of such a collapse during the time-period covered by this book. Though as the new millennium advanced, as the decline went on, faster all the time, with

no end in sight, as one side stumbled about with no ideas, no answers, while the other side went ever more completely off the deep end... But that is the subject of another book.

Down and down the whole thing went as those post-Reagan years wore on and on, with the occasional pause though never a sign of a reversal of course. Down in the years of Gabriela's struggle to regain control of the container terminal which she had inherited from Roy, and down in the years of struggle to make a go of it. Down still in that most problematic year of all when the situation around the terminal seemed to grow grimmer with each passing day, each of those grey and rainy fall days. With Bowman running wild as Thanksgiving fast approached, and with no relief in sight. Nothing for Gabriela to do but to hope and pray that sooner or later something would happen, someone would come in and save the day. Someone...

"Hello Ms. Uh... Gabriela. This is Gary. I don't know if ya..."

"Gary! Hello." She tried not to let the sudden elation show in her voice as she spoke into the receiver, having grown so accustomed to disguising what she felt over the last few years that it came as second nature to her now. "So you're here? You're in town?"

"Yeah, I'm here for that... You know that..."

"The job? Yes, of course." She fought the smile that began to grow on her face, until realizing all at once that there was no one else in that little office of hers to see it, she let it come bursting out. "I'm happy you remembered about it."

"Yeah, a course..."

"So you can just come down here, okay? The job is all ready for you. It's waiting. So you can come down... Tomorrow, okay?" She almost said now until she remembered the late hour of the day.

"Tomorrow? Sure, I can be there. But what's the uh...?"

"Tomorrow first thing."

"Yeah right, I'll be there. No problem about that. But I'm just wonderin', like... What's the job exactly? Cause ya never told me..."

"Oh, it's a good job. It's a very good job."

"Yeah? Doin' what? A good job...?"

"It's a very good job. So you can just come down here and I'll meet you, okay? I'll meet you at the gate."

"Yeah, okay. Whatever ya..."

"You can find the dock, you think?"

"Find it? That's no problem, cause like I been findin' docks my whole life."

“Okay then, I’ll see you here. Tomorrow first thing.”

“Yeah sure. Tomorrow.”

THE HERO

Gabriela stood waiting outside the gate to the terminal the next day in the early morning chill, bundled up in coat and sweater in a way that she never would have been back in her old southern home and thankful that at least it wasn’t raining that day. She stood in the dim light, eyeing what few cars happened to pass by on the quiet streets that gloomy, overcast day. With no ship in the terminal and no cargo being worked, no longshoremen in sight, so that the traffic outside was very light. A car here, a truck there. When all at once she noticed a pedestrian off in the distance, making his way toward her. A big man at sight of whom she felt a thrill in her breast such as she hadn’t felt in years. And then as that big, unmistakable figure drew ever nearer, as the physical details came more clearly into focus with each step he took, he seemed to look better all the time. Better even than what she remembered from their previous encounter. With a bit of grey in his shaggy brown hair, though with beautiful blue eyes that showed no sign of age, and with a gait that was far lighter and more graceful than would seem possible for a man his size. And though he looked her up and down several times as he came, ogled her in a furtive, shy sort of way, still she found nothing offensive about it. Found it so highly complementary, in fact, that had he not averted his eyes as he came to a stop before her, turned them toward the gate and the dock beyond and even toward the ground rather than meeting her own eyes which gazed steadily up at him...

“Mornin’, Ms. Gabriela.”

“Good morning. You made it. I’m so happy to see you.” The words flowed easily as the smile on her face grew wider.

“Yeah, it’s good to see you, too.” Gary’s eyes looked into hers for a split second before darting away, a strange spark piercing the air between them in that instant.

“So you’re ready to work? You’re ready to start?” Gabriela tried to move the conversation along, feeling a bit intimidated herself by the intensity of that moment. “Today? Right now?”

“Yeah sure, but I’m just wonderin’... I mean, what’s the job exactly? Is it like shoregang or somethin’?”

“Shoregang...?” She had never heard that expression before.

“Yeah, you know like where ya relieve the crew and do sailors’ work while the ship’s in port and stuff like that.”

“The crew? No, we don’t have that. We don’t have American ships here. Only foreign.”

“No? So ya...?”

“It’s a good job. Very good. I’ll tell you about it inside, okay? I’ll tell you all about it.” Gabriela didn’t want to reveal too much about her plans until after they were through the gate, afraid that she might scare the man off if she were to throw out a phrase like terminal manager so early in the discussion, at a time when it would still be easy for him to walk away. And so wanting to put whatever barrier she could into his path of flight, she went on speaking words of encouragement while leading the way toward the entrance.

Toward the spot where a brand new security guard she had never seen before that day stood waiting for them. A man with whom she had no rapport and no pull since his presence owed nothing to any decision or action on her part, having been brought in strictly as a result of the latest wave of insanity to have hit that terminal: Bowman’s decision of the day before to take on one of his last remaining rivals for power, Sorensen.

His decision to try pulling off the same type of power-grab at the security department that he already had at so many other departments. Invading the office and guard posts along with a few of his henchmen and running off any Sorensen loyalists he encountered, promoting others to take their places. But then while the initial conquest may have gone smoothly enough, Bowman had soon found himself faced with a serious problem when it came to the implementation of the second part of his plan, according to the rumors that reached Gabriela’s ears. It was a problem unlike anything he’d had to deal with before as he came to discover on his first day in power just how horrendous was the quality of the people from among whom he would have to choose the new leadership. With the few competent individuals working in that department being such true believers in Sorensen’s weird brand of Christianity that there was no way any of them would consider switching sides, while the remainder consisted of little more than drunks and near-idiot and other assorted losers. Such faithful images of their leader’s pre-conversion self that as Bowman surveyed his new troops, he had soon come to the conclusion that he had no choice but to bring in a whole crop of fresh new faces on the next day in order to fill the gaping holes. Fresh faces straight out of some guard-for-hire company.

And to make matters even worse, he had also found that Sorensen had taken certain precautions in advance of the move, perhaps having been warned by that God of his. Found that the guy had previously hidden away most of the small stock of police equipment they owned, not to mention every key for every lock in the entire terminal complex. And since that big reformed drunkard had also managed to evade capture on the day of the assault, he was soon regrouping for what looked to be an extended battle. He with the security department pickup truck in which he had made his getaway, and with a fast-growing cadre of henchmen as his most faithful followers had begun to filter back into the terminal almost from the moment they were expelled. With so many men at his disposal by day’s end—not to mention all those keys which he had in his possession, those perfect tools for the creation of havoc—that already on the night which had just come to an end, he had launched his first counter-offensive. He and his people had entered every building, every office controlled by Bowman and then trashed it. Destroyed or at least disrupted and disorganized everything they could get their hands on, while just for good measure they had also installed brand new padlocks everywhere they could think of. Padlocks for which only they had the keys.

And they had left the terminal in such a mess that as the others arrived at work that morning, their first order of business was to go around cutting padlocks and removing whatever improvised barricades they encountered, after which came the long, tedious process of straightening out the disaster zones which their places of work had become overnight. With everyone sorting through scattered and damaged property, trying to salvage what they could while the old-timers grumbled and the newly arrived security guards stumbled around half lost. Most of them with confused looks on their faces, or at least with the sort of dull, groping-in-the-dark expression to be seen on the face of that man who stood there waiting for Gabriela and Gary, clipboard in hand and instructions from Bowman to admit only those people whose names appeared on the list he had been given a short time before.

“Hello, I’m back,” Gabriela said in what she hoped was a casual voice.

“And who’s...?” the guard began until suddenly she reached out and snatched the clipboard from his hands, knowing that Gary’s name wouldn’t be there so that her only choice was to bluff their way inside.

“Here!” she said as she pointed at a name almost at random, the first name she recognized as belonging to someone who wouldn’t be in that morning. “Right here.” And then handing back the clipboard with a smile and a nod, she led the way inside. The first obstacle in her long path back to peace and prosperity, or at least back to power, having been surmounted.

She led the way to the first building they came to just inside the gate, the only building in that whole section of the terminal, in fact, sitting alone as it did at the head of the pier, far from all the other offices and shops. She walked right past the doors to the warehouse and the crane maintenance workshop, knowing that any greeting there might be less than friendly, and she made no move to show her companion the deserted longshore breakroom and clerk’s office which occupied the remainder of the ground floor either, but instead she headed directly toward the stairs to the upper floor. Up to the cargo planning office which was probably the only safe place for the two of them in that entire terminal.

O’Hara wasn’t there that day, with no ships in port and no cargo to be worked, and neither were any of the other senior people in the department. The only one present being one of the younger, more junior employees whose name Gabriela wasn’t quite sure of, sitting off in a corner where he was doing some sort of computer work. And so with all the rest of that bright and spacious office at her disposal, she walked right over to stand by one of the big picture windows that overlooked the silent dock.

“You like it?” she asked as she turned to look into the big man’s elusive eyes, darting about the office and the world outside the windows.

“Oh yeah, it’s great. Real nice place.”

“Yes, it’s a nice place. It’s very good here.” Gabriela knew that the moment of truth had arrived, the time for her to tell this man what she wanted from him. Though the problem was to figure out how to begin. “It can be a nice place anyway. Like it was before. It can be nice again.”

“Ya mean like back before all that trouble ya been havin’?”

“Yes, before that... all that... Like what you saw that day...” Wait, that wasn’t what she wanted to talk about. That wasn’t where she wanted this conversation to go. Though where else could she lead it now? What else could she say besides, “It can be nice again. It really can. But I need help. I need...” you, she was about to say until she caught herself.

“Help? Sure! A course I’ll help ya.” Gary’s eyes looked into hers all at once as he spoke, holding there for a nervous second before flitting away once again.

“You will? You will?”

“Yeah, I’ll do whatever ya want. I’ll take that job you’re offerin’ me, that... Whatever it is.”

“The job...?” Even with the tacit consent which she had just received, still Gabriela hesitated to utter the word manager. Still she sought some way to ease into that part of the subject. Something like... “It’s this,” she finally said after an extended pause, waving her arm toward the windows and the dock beyond as she spoke.

“This...?” Gary responded in a vague, confused tone as he looked out the window and then down at the desk and computer just below it. “Cargo planning? I don’t know anything about that.”

“No, it’s this. That!” Gabriela waved her arm more expansively now, turning her head at the same time to indicate the world beyond the window.

“The dock? What about it?”

“Everything! The dock and the cranes and the containers. The whole terminal.”

“The what!? Me!!?” As their eyes met now, there was no longer any spark of love coming from the big man. There was only a look of shocked disbelief.

“Yes you, because it has to be you.”

“Me? You gotta be kidding. I don’t know anything about...”

“You! Yes you. You’re the only one.” Only you can save me, she added to herself alone. Wishing as she spoke that she were the type of woman who could flutter her eyelids and play the victim as she begged for help, perhaps even swoon into his big, strong arms. Wishing that for once in her life she had some tool at her disposal more powerful than truth and logic.

“Geez, I don’t know...”

“You can! I know you can do it. I’m sure.”

“Run this place? This whole place? That’s what you’re talkin’ about?”

“Yes, all of it. You!”

"I don't know, cause like I never ran anything in my life. I never even ran a watch. I just took orders from the Mate. And now you're talkin' about..."

"I know you can do it. I know you're the right man."

"Me? The boss? Like a... Like a suit or somethin'? Me!?"

"Oh, you don't have to wear that." Gabriela wasn't sure what he meant, looking down at the well-used workclothes he had on. "You can dress how you want."

"I can...? No, that's not what I mean. It's just that... Like I never been in charge-a anything before, and I never been a leader. Never."

"But now you can! I know you can."

"I don't know..." Gary's voice faded into thought as Gabriela looked on encouragingly, trying to catch those eyes which now avoided hers more assiduously than ever. "Cause the thing is, I been kind of a drifter my whole life. Like I get a couple-a bucks in my pocket and I'm gone. No strings and no stickin' around, so I just... I don't know. Cause what you're talkin' about sounds so..." His voice faded once again before shooting back in a startled tone, "It sounds so permanent."

"It can be if you want," she said solemnly, hoping that it came off more like a promise than a threat.

"I don't know, I just..."

"You can do it. I know you can. You can do anything."

As Gabriela pleaded softly and repeated her assurances over the next few minutes, it was only to be met with ongoing doubt. With the refusal of that big, handsome man before her to believe in himself and the things she said about him. His refusal to believe in those capacities of his which to her seemed so obvious when viewed from the outside: not only his size and strength but his intelligence as well, that intelligence which was clearly much higher than what he let on. Because the man had everything going for him, as far as she could tell. Absolutely everything. And the only problem was to convince him of who and what he was, of what he could be. To make him see what it was that she saw in him.

He refused to see it, though, no matter what she said. He refused to repeat that initial yes which he had given before and thereby become the man and the leader that by all rights he should be. He refused so stubbornly that finally, seeing no other way out of the gathering impasse, she said to him in a low but firm voice, "Come with me. I'll show you." I'll show you how bad the situation really is, and I'll show you why only you can solve it. Only you can save the day.

Gabriela led the way back down the stairs and out to one of the planning department pickup trucks parked outside, one of the few vehicles in that terminal which hadn't been tampered with the night before. And then with the big man taking a seat beside her, she drove

them across the lanes leading in from the front gate, over to the little road that looped around outside the rows of parked containers, and finally to the group of buildings located on the far side of the property, just inside the rear gate. The main gate in actual fact, the one where containers entered and left the yard, and the one which most of the employees used since nearly every department other than cargo planning was located there, the main office and the various special cargoes, along with a whole list of garages and repair shops.

With so many places to choose from that the only problem was to decide which one to try first, Gabriela said to herself as she made her approach. Should she take her big passenger straight into the main office? Straight into a re-encounter with Bowman at the very seat of his power? Or would it be better to try somewhere else first? Hazmat or reefers or even one of the repair shops where their arrival would generate fewer sparks. Somewhere like...? No, forget about that. It had to be the main office. Straight into the lion's den.

And Gabriela's heart was racing like it seldom had as the two of them stepped through the door. It was racing from apprehension or perhaps from anticipation, from the picture she held in her mind of Bowman's reaction when he first caught sight of Gary. The look of shock that was sure to appear on his face, the panicked retreat or the immediate surrender as memories of that day in Nevada came flooding back in upon him. Memories of his ignominious defeat. And so she could hardly wait for that dramatic moment even as she dreaded it. That implosion of all the man's plans, that sudden deflation, that...

Her heart sank quickly as she looked around the office only to find that there was no sign of Bowman, not in the main section and not in the manager's office which he had recently commandeered. There was only the usual rabble, all of them hard at work gathering up and organizing the mounds of documents which lay scattered everywhere around that room as a result of the previous night's raid, and all of them so busy that hardly anyone seemed to take notice of her or the man beside her. Only a woman or two pausing to look them over for more than the briefest of moments. To look in the slow, lingering way that certain women do when they catch sight of a good-looking man.

And of all the people in that big room, the only one to react with any of the alarm or the astonishment which Gabriela had been expecting was Tony Baloney, the sole veteran of Nevada and therefore the only one present who was capable of understanding the significance of Gary's arrival. Capable of responding to the big man's entrance with a double-take such as rarely seen outside movie comedies, his head jerking here-to-there-and-back-to-here and his eyes growing wide with surprise until suddenly he jumped up and went rushing out the back door. Off to warn Bowman along with everyone else, most likely.

"Sure is a mess in here," said Gary in a noncommittal way as though commenting upon some natural phenomenon. And while his eyes had clearly followed Tony's less-than-stealthy exit, he gave no indication of being aware of its significance.

"Yes, it's bad..." Gabriela wasn't sure what more to say now that their entrance had failed so miserably to follow her script. "But this is nothing, really. This is a small thing."

"Oh yeah?"

So what to do next, she wondered. Should they wait right there in the main office for Bowman to show up? Or should she take Gary into her own little office in back? The only one in the entire building which hadn't been trashed the night before, so that the impression it was likely to make...

In the end she decided to move on to another building, back out the door and across the small parking lot where she had left the pickup. Out into the open air where it soon became apparent just how well Tony had done his job of spreading the alarm as heads came popping out of doorways and windows on all sides of them, men and women straining to get a glimpse of the man who had so famously given their leader that beat-down of some weeks before. Though despite all the faces that peered their way, Gabriela failed to see the one that would have mattered the most. She failed to see Bowman who was evidently still in pursuit of Sorensen somewhere off in the distance.

She led the way over to the next building where the hazmat office was located, all those inside quickly retreating from the doorway as the two of them entered and then hanging back afterwards to get a better look at the big man. To stand in a row and stare at him with a mixture of curiosity and shellshock on their faces, nearly overwhelmed by the immensity of the task before them, it appeared, and glad to turn their attention away from it for a few moments at least. Away from the mounds of documents which covered the floor in the glass-enclosed office section of the building, the broken and damaged equipment to be seen everywhere on the other side of the glass, out in the big open area that gave access to the bays where trucks were backed up and cargoes inspected. With lashings having been cut into small pieces or tied into knots, while everything that could be ripped up had been ripped up, everything that could be smashed, smashed.

And though there may have been suspicion, even hostility in some of the looks being directed at Gabriela and her man, nobody there said a word about it. Not until Henderson came charging into the office section from the bays where he had just been working, that is. Henderson, the scrawny little runt who had been running that department ever since the previous boss was chased off by Bowman, and a guy who, despite what he may have lacked when it came to size as he went after the big man who had just invaded his realm, more than made up for it with vocal bravado. "What the hell are you doin' in here? Didn't ya do enough damage already? Get outa here! Get out!!"

Tossing insults and accusations at that man who towered above him, that man whose arrival coincided so neatly with the damage, as Henderson pointed out more than once. The little man laying into him for all he was worth while Gary looked on with a stoic, emotionless face, not speaking back but not budging from the spot where he stood, either.

"You did it! I know ya did. And now you're comin' in here to gloat about it, huh? Well let me tell ya, that shit don't fly around here. So you just get the hell out. Get out!"

On and on he went, Gary still saying nothing.

When suddenly Henderson turned his fury upon Gabriela. “You get outa here, too, you goddamned bitch!” he yelled all at once, with such heat in his voice that it sent shivers through her body. Gary’s big body stiffening perceptibly as he quickly stepped between them.

“You leave her the fuck outa this!” he shouted in a voice so booming, so menacing that everyone in the room seemed to take a step back. “You say what ya wanta say about me, but you leave her alone. Ya got that!? You leave her alone!”

Henderson stood as though struck mute at the sound of those words, his nerves so tense that he took another step backward at the first sign of movement on the part of his big antagonist. Though even with the physical mismatch as clear as it was, still he refused to turn his back and flee altogether. Still he held some of his ground, ready to put up whatever fight he could.

And the little man was still in that same spot when Gary turned to Gabriela a moment later and said, “Let’s go,” in a tone such as she hadn’t heard from him before. Commanding. Decisive. The tone of the man she had been hoping that he would prove himself to be.

“Okay, you got it,” Gary said in a softer though still resolute voice as the two of them rode along together on their way back to the building by the front gate some minutes later. With nothing resolved since Bowman had still failed to make an appearance. “I’m your man,” he added with an air of finality.

“Yes? You are!?” Gabriela could have jumped into his arms and given him a big kiss at that moment had she not been busy with her driving. She could have yelled and danced around and pumped her fist into the air. She could have... No, she couldn’t have done any of those things. Not when the man beside her turned away so quickly, before their eyes could even meet as she looked his way with a big, heartfelt smile on her face. Beaming in a way that she hadn’t done in years, though it was only for her smile to go unanswered by that man who stared out the windshield with a grim, determined look on his face. Not another word from his lips while the only phrase that would come to hers was, “Thank you.” Just that and nothing more. “Thank you. Thank you.”

And Gary didn’t speak again until after they were back inside the planning office, gazing out the big picture windows for the longest time before finally he spun around and asked Gabriela to tell him everything she knew about the situation around the terminal. That situation which had now become his own problem as well as hers. He asked her questions in a quiet, serious voice, and then as he listened to her replies, his eyes would be back on the windows every time. Turning to look her way only when he had a new question to ask, though as he did so he never once looked into her eyes. Instead he would look at her mouth or her hair or even her ear. Anywhere but those windows into her soul.

Anywhere but those eyes which looked back at him fixedly, brimming with hope and gratitude and so many other emotions that she was unable to express. Not when her thoughts and feelings had become such a jumble even to herself that day, and not when Gary’s words seemed to avoid any mention of the personal just as diligently as his eyes avoided hers.

Over time his questions grew more and more specific as though some plan were slowly taking shape in his head. Who could they count on for support in this department? That

department? Where could they find the old O'Hara loyalists who had been run out of there? And what exactly was Sorensen up to? Whose side was he on?

Finally after an hour, two hours interrupted only by the occasional pause during which Gabriela made phone calls to one would-be supporter or another, Gary seemed to run out of questions at last. Looking up all at once and saying, "Hey, let's go take a break and let this stuff settle in for awhile, okay?" Spoken in a tone as though to declare that this phase of the operation was now over. "Let's go get us some lunch."

And so before many more minutes had elapsed, the two of them were on their way to a nearby diner in the planning department pickup truck, neither of them having a vehicle of their own while Gabriela's sack lunch sat abandoned in her office. Back in the heart of Bowman-land where she had no desire to go even had she preferred that meal to this. They were riding along together and sharing a meal in an excursion which soon proved to be as replete with awkward silences as she had been expecting, perhaps fearing on some inner level. With no further discussion of business by a sort of unspoken mutual consent, but with Gabriela's attempts to broach other, more personal topics quickly running afoul of Gary's shyness or his reticence to talk about himself or whatever it may have been. Her questions about his past met with evasions or changes of subject or with single-word answers at best, so that in the end the only things left for them to discuss were the weather and music and a movie or two.

And since even within that narrow range of subjects Gary's words were few and soft-spoken, it came as quite a shock to Gabriela when suddenly the other side of his personality came leaping out as they arrived back at the terminal gate. The strong and determined side of him appearing from out of nowhere, it seemed, as all at once he launched into what would prove to be the first small skirmish in his campaign to retake the terminal.

"Hello ma'am," said the guard as the pickup truck came to a halt, the same guard who had been there earlier that morning. "And hello Mr. uh..." He looked down at the list on his clipboard. "Mr. Chu."

"Mr. what?" Gary's voice shot back toward the driver's window by which the man stood. "Do I look like someone who'd be named Chu?"

"No, but she said..."

"I don't care what she said," Gary cut him short. "Cause my name's not Chu, and I'm not... Here, gimme that list-a yours. Give it to me!"

As the guard pulled back from the window, Gary leaped out of the truck and dashed around to confront him. "Give it to me," he repeated. "Give it to me or I'll take it from ya!" he went on, an implied I'll-take-your-arm-with-it in his tone. With such authority behind his words that the guard could do little more than surrender as the big man drew near. Hang his head and hand over the clipboard just as he had been told.

"Okay now, I tell ya what, Mr. uh... What's your name?"

"It's... It's Smith," the man half-stuttered.

“Smith!? You gotta be shittin’ me.”

“No, it really is. It’s Smith. Jim Smith.”

“Jim Smith?” Gary paused for a second before continuing on in a milder though still commanding voice. “Well I tell ya what, Mr. Smith. Ya see this list right here? It don’t mean shit anymore cause the guy who gave it to ya’s got no right to go givin’ orders to anyone around here. No one. And if ya go followin’ any more-a his orders, then you’re gone. You’re outa here. Got it?”

“Yessir...” Smith said in a low, doubtful tone.

“And ya see that pretty lady sittin’ over there? She’s gonna give ya a whole new list, and a good one, too. Cause ya know what? She’s the one who’s really in charge-a this place around here, her and the people who work for her, like me. So from here on out, that’s the only people you’re gonna be takin’ orders from. Just me and her. Ya got that?”

“Yessir...”

“And you’re gonna tell your relief the same thing, right? Cause if ya do that and ya follow our orders, then ya can keep your jobs. Maybe even get better ones. But if ya go doin’ what that other guy says, then you’re outa here. On your asses! Ya got that?”

“Yessir.” Smith sounded slightly more convinced now as Gary said, “Good,” before getting back into the truck for what remained of their journey. Back up the stairs to the planning office where Gabriela set about updating the list they had just taken from the guard, adding names and scratching out others, while Gary paced about impatiently. With nothing to do until the arrival of Cervone whom Gabriela had contacted with one of her phone calls and told to come down right after lunch, not the next day as she had told the others. And then no sooner had she finished her work on the list than Gary was off to deliver it to the gate while she remained behind in the otherwise empty room, that lone employee having left some time ago. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, she sat and waited for the big man to return. Enough time for him to crawl to the gate and back on hands and knees as still the minutes ticked by. Twenty... When suddenly he came bursting back through the door with Cervone in tow.

Good old Cervone! Gabriela’s spirits lit up at the sight of that friendly face which she hadn’t seen in days. Not since Bowman’s takeover of the maintenance department. And while there was something a bit pathetic about him now at first glance, showing his age in a way that he never had before and with much of the spring and confidence gone from his step, still she could see from the moment he smiled that he was the same man he had always been. With the same warm and infectious smile that had brightened so many of her days past. Shining her way once again and sending her leaping to her feet to give him a huge hug.

“It’s so good to see you,” she said as she embraced her old friend. “I’m so happy you’re back.”

“Glad to be back,” he said in a quietly emotional voice. “Glad to be back.” With none of the jokes he would have told before, though at least something of the old spirit could be heard in that voice of his, some hint of the old lilt.

A few minutes later the three of them were sitting down to discuss the situation which had brought them together. Or more correctly, two of them were listening while Gary did most of the talking, laying out what he saw as their best strategy for the campaign ahead. Telling them first of all that it was too late to attempt anything major on that day. Saying that with more than half the day gone already and with a ship due in early the next morning so that all the key players would be present that day, it seemed like that would be a far better time for them to strike. They along with as many of the old loyalists as they could round up between now and then, attacking so quickly and moving so methodically that with any luck at all they could retake control of the entire terminal in a single day. With Bowman and his people gone or at least stripped of their power, and with Sorensen...

Sorensen. He was the joker in that deck of cards they were playing with, a man whose strategy and goals, even his motives were unknown to any of them seated there. So that whether he was simply out to get even with Bowman and recover lost ground, or whether he was on a campaign to spread his strange faith everywhere, or whether he had been told by that God of his to burn the whole place to the ground, none of them could say. Any of those things were possible, as far as they knew. And so whatever he turned out to do on the following day, they would just have to play it by ear. They would have to deal with it as best they could when the time came.

In the meantime, though, there was one objective which Gary thought they should take care of before that present day was over. The whole reason he had asked for Cervone to come in that afternoon, in fact. There was the crane maintenance shop downstairs, the possession of which would give them a solid beachhead from which to launch their operations the next day. Because if they held that entire building, upstairs and down, along with the nearby gate where hopefully they could count on the backing of Smith and his successors, they would already be in control of the heart of the loading process before the next day even began. Leaving only the offices and shops on the far side of the terminal to be dealt with at that time.

It was a plan that sounded good to Gabriela when she heard it stated in such simple and straightforward terms, far better than anything she had come up with on her own. And she especially liked the part about one more day, stated with an air of such confidence on the part of that man, an air of certainty such as she had been...

“Let’s go,” the big guy said all at once, looking at Cervone as he spoke, before turning to Gabriela to add, “You better stay here.”

“I what?”

“You better stay here, cause there’s no tellin’ what’s gonna happen.”

“I better...? Don’t be silly!” she practically shouted as the import of the words sank in. The idea that she needed to be protected like some helpless little thing. And the idea that he was

giving orders to her! To her!! That man who was there for no other reason than to work for her and to... Who did he think he was!?

"I'm coming!" she cut him off when he tried to speak again. "I won't stay here." Because the very idea!

And so she went along with the others as they set out for enemy territory, the furthest back as they paused outside the door to count down, the third in line as they went charging through. With Cervone shoving the door open and pointing out the Bowman stooge, Gary lunging out to seize him so quickly that the battle was over even before it had begun, Gabriela stepping inside only in time to witness the aftermath. To see the big man as he stood clutching his captive by the collar while shouting, "Get outa here!" and to see the other men who worked there staring open-mouthed, frozen with shock until Cervone broke the spell by going over to shake hands with one, nod at the other and explain to them both that there was a new sheriff in town. That Bowman's reign had come to an end and that he was now back in charge.

So it's working! The plan is working, Gabriela wanted say, maybe even shout. But then as she looked at the men who had entered the room with her, she saw that they were still too distracted, too intent upon the completion of their missions to stop and celebrate just yet. Not Cervone who soon headed off with the two crane men to survey his newly reconquered province, the back rooms of the shop and the warehouse that adjoined it, and not Gary who struck out at the same time to escort his prisoner to the gate. Off to make sure that the guy actually left the terminal, as he explained before he went, and to make sure that Smith understood what was happening as well. They walked away, both of them, leaving Gabriela standing alone in that room. The thrill of victory fading quickly in her solitude.

Fading only to die out altogether the moment she caught sight of Gary's face as he reappeared upon the scene some minutes later. Deadly serious. His sole act of celebration a businesslike, "So far so good," as he came through the door, followed immediately by a switch to other subjects. To future plans which he discussed in no-nonsense phrases. And while his voice may still have rung with confidence as he spoke, his eyes remained as dodgy as ever, wandering about the room and looking at everything but her. The windows and the equipment and the workbenches.

Look at me, Gabriela urged the man with her own eyes as he went on talking about this and that for the coming day. Discussing his plans for the rest of the afternoon as well, telling her that he wanted to go out and walk around by himself for a little while, learn what he could about the layout of the terminal. And it was only then, only as he came to the end of that topic and began to mumble out an awkward goodbye, that he ever looked her directly in the eye. Held there for a nervous second while he tossed out a quick, "Don't go without me."

Don't go without him!? What was that? Another order!? Gabriela wasn't sure how to take it, being told by that man to wait for him. As though she couldn't walk home by herself like she did every other day when there was no one there to give her a ride. Morning and afternoon. Walking alone, with no man to protect her, no big strong... The more she thought about it, the more offended she became. Because him giving orders to her? Again!! She was almost tempted

to start for home right then and there just to teach the guy a lesson. Just to show him who was boss.

And she might have done so, too, might have stormed off in a huff had it not been for Cervone who came walking back into the room all at once. Good old Cervone. His sense of humor already making a comeback, she could see as he greeted her with one of his jokes, and as the mere sound of his voice seemed to soothe her rising pique. Perhaps even send it into remission as the two of them soon sat down on a bench together where they began to talk. Began to reminisce a bit in the way that old friends do when they get back together, though they spent far more time discussing the events of that day. Future events as well. Quietly celebrating their victory of some minutes before while speculating at length about the prospects for the coming day. Projecting their hopes upon a future which was suddenly starting to look so much brighter to both of them. Brighter now than it had looked even a single day before.

They talked and talked as minutes, even hours slipped by. With Cervone speaking in leisurely, relaxed tones since he knew that he had all the time in the world, the plan being for him to spend the night there where he could hold down the gains they had made during the day. Though as for Gabriela, she looked out the dirt-caked windows from time to time, watching for signs of that gathering twilight which came along so early at that time of year and anxious to get going on her long walk to the *Lady G* before it got too dark. Anxious to... Anxious to see that big man again, she slowly came to realize. Anxious to see him come walking through the door, smiling at her and saying hello, accompanying her on the walk to her floating home whether she needed the protection or not. Because she longed to be with that man again, longed to talk to...

"There you are," she yelled as Gary made his return at last. With a fury in her voice which she hadn't known was there until now. "You want to walk with me? Well come on. I'm going now," she went on without giving him a chance to speak.

"Yes'm," he mumbled back. Obedient, contrite. "Right away."

And then without waiting for him to say more or even to gather his bearings, she grabbed her things and started toward the door, the big man hurrying to catch up as she strode along without a look back. Without a glance or a nod as he fell in alongside, but instead her air was cold and castigating. Designed to punish that man for his presumption and to show him who was the boss around there. Who it was that gave the orders.

As for Gary, her harsh tone seemed to have left him so cowed as they began their walk that he dared not say another word, only screwing up the courage to speak after they had gone some considerable distance. "I wonder if it's gonna rain tomorrow," he half mumbled in a tentative sort of way, his eyes fixed on the sky ahead.

"It probably will. It usually does." Gabriela spoke sharply. With more hostility in her voice than what she actually felt, for some reason. With more desire to punish than what the man really deserved.

"Yeah, you're probably right..." His voice faded as his nerve seemed to fail him.

And Gary said nothing more for a long time after that. Not until the gate to the marina where the *Lady G* was docked had come well within view, a quarter mile or so ahead. Not until then, with the end of their walk in sight, the awkward goodbye from him and the... Whatever she would say, however she would react...

"Ya know," he began as hesitantly as ever. "I heard Mr. Cervone talkin' about how ya, like... About how your husband went and put so much work into buildin' that place back there, and how ya been... Like all the stuff ya been goin' through to keep it goin'..."

"Yes?" Her tone was softer now, much of the fight gone out of her at last.

"And he says that the reason you're doin' it's, like... He says it's not for the money. He says it's for... Like for the memory or the dream or somethin'. For keepin' that dream alive."

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, I just wanta say that I think it's about the finest thing I ever heard of in my whole life. I think it's just... It's fantastic."

"Thank you." Her voice faltered a bit in the way that his might have done. Taken aback at that sudden compliment from out of nowhere.

"And ya know, I think you gotta be, like... You gotta be the finest woman I ever met."

"Thank you," she said again. But then as she tried to say more, the words seemed to catch in her throat. Thrown off balance by what she had just heard and perhaps a bit remorseful as well. Sorry for the cold words which she had spoken earlier, those words, that tone which had come from... From where? She wasn't sure. She couldn't say. Those words which almost seemed to have spoken themselves.

With Gary evidently having said all that he had to say, the two of them finished their walk in silence. They came to a halt outside the gate to the floating docks where they turned to face each other directly for the first time in hours. The big man's eyes looking down to meet hers in the dim light and then lingering there in a way that they never had before. Caressing her in some strange, almost mystical way and drawing her in as though some spell were being cast, some enchantment... Only broken when Gabriela stepped forward all at once to give him a hug and a, "Thank you." An, "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Holding herself back all the while to keep from going any further. To keep from kissing him, inviting him inside.

And then as she passed through the gate and walked down the ramp to the dock alone, all she could say to herself was, What a man. What a frustrating man! So noble and valiant at times, while at others he acted like a stumbling, bumbling clown. And he was so... so... The funniest thing about it, though, was the way that she hadn't thought about Roy once during the day, not until Gary mentioned him a short time before. She hadn't compared this man to that other man in her life as she so unfailingly did with every man she met. Compared them unfavorably as always seemed to be the case. Because somehow from the first moment she had seen him walking down the road that morning, perhaps even from the moment he had called her the day before, her thoughts had been on him and him alone. Not on seeing him as some pale imitation of Roy, but

rather on him as a man in his own right. One who was so full of potential if only he weren't so... so...

Gabriela awoke the next morning to find that it was raining, just as she had predicted, though in this case it wasn't one of those typical light Pacific Northwestern rains. No, it was an all-out Pineapple Express. The type of rain that can back up storm drains even in a city that is well prepared for rain. The type that always seemed to find its way through whatever raingear she wore. And so she hesitated to set out on the long walk to the terminal despite her sense of anticipation. She watched and waited instead, waited for some break in the downpour.

And it wasn't until somewhere around mid-morning that she ever arrived at the terminal gate, her feet soaked while every other part of her body was wet or damp, the rain not having let up all the way until she was nearly there. "Good mornin' ma'am," she heard from Smith who was back on duty that day, though on this occasion he wasn't alone. Not with all the longshoremen, even a few seamen coming and going through the front gate on that busy day. "So what'd ya hear?" he went on. "Ya got any news?"

"No, I don't know anything yet. What do you hear?"

"Stuff, just stuff, that's all. I hear there's lotsa stuff goin' on."

And then even when Gabriela stopped in at the crane maintenance shop a minute later, still she failed to learn anything of substance about the morning's events. Being told as she entered that Cervone had left there hours before with a few of the old faces who had made their return, the whole group of them off to retake the other outposts of the maintenance department, according to what the people there said. Since their departure, though, no one had heard another word from them, nothing but rumors having made it back to the shop. Stories which were so vague in some cases, so confusing in others, that it wasn't until Gabriela's next stop—at the planning office where O'Hara was running the day shift in that now buzzing room—that she ever began to catch up on the day's fast-moving events.

O'Hara with his bald head and those glasses which normally served to magnify his eternally weary eyes, though on this occasion what they brought out was a rare sparkle. A twinkle such as she would have expected to see from Cervone, not O'Hara. And then as he began to speak and to explain all the news which had filtered back to him so far, that twinkle seemed to grow brighter with each victory he described. Cervone and his men having taken back every shop and garage that belonged to the maintenance department, after which they had gone after the reefer shop where the usurper was quickly run off and the rightful head reinstated. Which meant that right then as the two of them spoke, the only buildings still under Bowman's control were the main business office and the hazmat building where they had been unable to recruit the old chief, leaving them with no one to replace Henderson.

"So it's working?" Gabriela asked with a sparkle in her voice to match that in O'Hara's eyes.

"Yeah, it sure is," the old man replied. "So far." After which he went on to describe a series of events surrounding Sorensen, events as to whose veracity he couldn't vouch in all cases, he warned Gabriela from the beginning. He told her about the relative failure of that night's raids

thanks to Bowman's precautions: bringing in extra guards and asking for volunteers from among his people to spend the night there where they could protect the office and other sites, on top of which Bowman had stuck around all night himself, wandering everywhere in the terminal and chasing after Sorensen. Or more likely he had been chasing after whatever shadows he mistook for Sorensen.

And then with the arrival of that soggy dawn, just as Sorensen was getting ready to go underground and wait for the next night, it seemed that Gary had somehow managed to get into contact with him. The one big man soon convincing the other big man that they should coordinate their actions and get that thing over with once and for all. With Gary and his people going after the outlying buildings and shops while Sorensen would concentrate on the main gate. He and his men swooping in all at once to run off Bowman's new hires and put their own people back in charge of that strategic point from which they would be able to control access to the terminal and prevent the arrival of reinforcements for the other side. Able to cut Bowman off and leave him completely surrounded in the main office as he was at that very moment, according to everything that O'Hara had heard, so that there was only the final assault still to come. That assault for which the forces were already gathering even as they spoke.

"Now?" Gabriela asked as the story came to an end.

"Now or a little later or maybe at noon. I don't know. I've heard different stories," O'Hara answered a bit vaguely.

"So I should go there. I should go now."

"If ya want..."

Whatever doubts O'Hara may have had as to the wisdom of that course of action, Gabriela had none at all, asking with her next breath for permission to take one of his department's pickup trucks before starting out in the direction of the main office a minute or two later. Circling a bit as she began to draw near rather than pulling straight into the parking lot, driving around the periphery until she spotted a small group of men at some distance from the office. Gathered at what must have been the rallying point.

"Hello," said Gabriela after parking nearby and getting out to join them where they stood in the open air, the rain finally having stopped altogether. "We go now? It's time?"

"No, not yet. We're waitin' for the word," replied Richards, a former victim of Bowman's purges that she had known for some time. Back now to get his revenge or at least to reclaim his old job.

"So it's soon?"

"Yeah, soon. I hope..."

Soon, Gabriela repeated to herself as she took up a spot slightly removed from the others, a nod to this man, a "Hello" to that. Soon, as the flow of adrenaline through her veins began to ebb with the passage of time, the discomfort from standing about in damp clothes and shoes to

rise. Soon, as she checked her watch and checked it again. As she stood there with nothing to occupy her time and her mind but the conversation taking place among that group of men, the bad jokes and the blather and the other typical male nonsense. Her eyes searching ever more desperately all the while for something. Some sign of relief. Some sign of... That big man who finally made his appearance after hours and hours of waiting! Twenty minutes or so by clock time.

“Gabriela! Hello.” Gary’s eyes were only for her as he made his approach. “It’s good to see ya.”

“Yes, it’s good, too.” This time it was Gabriela who found herself tongue-tied, startled by the man’s direct gaze, the commanding tone in his voice.

“You’re just in time cause we’re gettin’ ready to go for it right now.”

“Yes...?” She wasn’t going to argue about that just-in-time part.

“Yeah, right now. Right through the front door. And I got it all set up with that Sorensen dude for him to cover the back door for us, so we’re like... This is it!”

“Good, I’m so happy.” And so ready to go, so very ready.

After a few brief instructions to the men gathered there, Gary started on his way toward the office. Heaving the front door open before strutting inside like he owned the place, coming to a halt after a few steps while the other men—and Gabriela—continued to enter and spread out on either side of him. Standing there powerful and imposing as the people seated at the various desks froze in the act and looked up with mouths agape, soon to be joined by Bowman who stepped out of the manager’s office to see what all the commotion was about. As the guy stopped and stood there in the doorway, however, he looked nothing like his usual haughty and confident self. His eyes red from lack of sleep and his hair a mess while his sport coat practically dripped with all the rainwater it had absorbed during the night-long pursuit of his enemy, and he had a strangely passive expression on his face as well. An expression which seemed to say that for him the fight was lost already. That he was looking on now merely to watch events unfold as they might, with no intention of trying to influence them.

And then it was just as the dust began to settle, as that dramatic entrance threatened to devolve into a simple staring contest, that suddenly Sorensen came bursting through the rear door with several of his own men in tow. That big reformed drunk who had shed his coat sometime earlier as though better to display the uniform which he had been devising for himself over the years, greatly embellished over the last few days, it appeared. Because as he and his men formed into a line blocking any escape through that door, he looked almost like a character from a comic-opera. Like a parody of a Latin American generalissimo. With stars and epaulettes and a big oversized badge which he had purchased somewhere, while just below it, on his left pocket where the medals should have been, he wore an even bigger and fancier cross. Gilt and filigree.

“Okay, you!” Gary was the first to speak, looking at the woman who occupied the desk nearest the front door and therefore the nearest to where he stood. “Who d’ya take your orders from around here?”

“Me...?” The woman looked stunned at being singled out in that way, and soon she was glancing about before turning around to look at Bowman.

“Okay, get outa here! Get the hell out!!”

The woman’s eyes snapped back in Gary’s direction at the sound of those words, dropped toward the desk a second later.

“I said get out. So get out now! Now!!”

With that latest repetition of the order, she was on her feet, taking a hesitant half-step in Bowman’s direction before Gary raised his voice yet again. Pointed at the door as he shouted, “That way! Get outa here and get out now and don’t ever come back.” Turned to one of his own men a moment later to tell him to go with her and make sure that she actually left the terminal.

With the woman gone, and with Bowman having answered her pleas for help with nothing more than a slight shrug, Gary began to look around at the other people in the office, his eyes soon coming to rest upon Tony Baloney. “You! Get the hell out, too. I’m not even gonna ask ya cause I know ya’d just lie to me. So get out! Get out!!”

Tony sat unmoving, his head shrinking down between his shoulders as though for protection while he avoided eye contact at all costs. Not that it did him any good as Gary was quickly upon him, dashing over to grab him by the back of his collar and raise him to his feet before reaching down with the other hand for the back of his belt. Using those handholds to lift the poor guy completely off the ground and carry him over to the exit in that undignified posture, his head used as a battering-ram to open the door before finally he was flung outside in a heap. Gone never to be seen again as another of Gary’s men was dispatched to make sure.

“Okay, so who’s next?” the big man said as he returned to his original spot. “Who’s gonna take their orders from that asshole back there instead-a me? Who’s it gonna be?”

“Listen, you can’t do this.” Bowman spoke up at last, a tremor in his voice.

“I can’t!!?” Gary squared off all at once, ready for round two. “Who says!?”

“You can’t... You can’t...” It was almost pathetic to hear Bowman whimper in that way. “I’ll sue you!” he finally managed to yell. “I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got.”

“Sue me?” Gary laughed as he said it.

“Yes I will. I’ll sue you! I swear I will.”

“Hey, ya hear that?” The big man’s eyes were now on Sorensen as he spoke. “He says he’s gonna sue us. That asshole says he’s...”

“Let him try,” Sorensen’s deep voice rumbled out in reply.

“Yeah, let him try...” Gary paused for a moment as Bowman suddenly went pale, looking back and forth at the two giants who stared at him menacingly. “So whattaya think we oughta...”

“Let’s kill him!” Sorensen roared all at once as he began to advance. One step, two steps, before Bowman retreated into his office and slammed the door shut behind him.

Gary’s body seemed to stiffen as he watched Sorensen go rushing over and grab the doorknob, but then when he saw that the door was locked, the attack thwarted for now, he soon went back to what he had been saying. “Okay so who’s gonna take their orders from the people who’re really runnin’ this place, and who’s gonna get out? Who’s it gonna be?” His eyes swept the room, moving from face to face. “You!” he finally said, pointing at one of the men at random. “Who ya gonna take your orders from?”

“You,” the man said in a quiet, submissive voice after a quick sidelong glance at the woman nearest him.

“And how bout you?” Gary went on, pointing at another occupant of that room.

“You,” he heard, followed by, “You.” “You,” as he went around to each man or woman in turn. “You,” they all said. So that before another minute had elapsed, he had everyone and everything in that office under his control.

Everything but the manager’s office, that is, that final bastion of resistance within which Bowman had barricaded himself, and that bastion which surely would have fallen peacefully over time had it not been for Sorensen and his impatience. That big religious fanatic who kept rattling the knob and banging on the solid part of the door with his shoulder. Banging it again and again, harder and harder each time, until suddenly he went over to grab a chair and smash it through the glass, shattering the recently-painted name on the door into a thousand tiny pieces.

“Stop him!” Gabriela screamed at the sight of that crazy man reaching his hand inside to unlock the door. “Stop him!” At which Gary took off like a shot in response while she followed along in his wake.

Followed all the way to the broken door where she stopped to watch as that big man of hers grabbed onto the other big man in an effort to prevent his reaching the third, formerly big man who stood cowering by the rear wall. Much reduced now in the way that a boxer is reduced just before he goes down. She watched as the two men shoved each other and wrestled and struggled. Without a punch being thrown, though with neither man willing to give an inch as they matched themselves up strength-to-strength. Panting and puffing louder all the time, but with the edge going to no one. The edge going to whoever could hold out longer.

“Okay, okay,” Sorensen gasped at last as Gary maneuvered him ever so slowly back toward the door. “I’m goin’.”

And then moving off a few steps as the other released his grip, he paused for a moment near where Gabriela stood. Straightened out his uniform and checked on the state of his accoutrements before finally he raised his head into a dignified position and proceeded on his way. Out the rear door with his men at his heels, a newborn grudge in his heart.

“Okay, Mr. Bowman,” Gary spoke in a quiet, almost apologetic tone once he had the other man alone. “Why don’t ya go home for a little while. Cause I know I can’t fire ya or anything like that, even if I wanted to, but ya just... Ya know, ya look like ya sure could use some rest. So go on home and clean yourself up, and then when you’re feelin’ better ya can come back. Okay? Will ya do that?”

“Yeah, whatever,” the man grunted more than spoke in reply. Disgruntled but docile now, with an air of defeat in his voice and actions as he gathered up a few things and started on his way. The remainder of Gary’s men going with him as he went, though they did so not to make sure that he left the terminal. They went along to protect him instead, should it turn out that Sorensen and his men were still lurking about.

“So we did it!” Gabriela said to no one in particular as she looked around the newly liberated office. At the now loyal workforce in the main room and at the manager’s office which was to be Gary’s, at the smaller office into which she had moved some time back and at the one beside it which had been Bowman’s until his recent power-grab. “You did it!” she said again as she turned to face Gary.

“Yeah, most of it,” came his reply. His voice soft but still determined as he went on a moment later to bring up the one piece of unfinished business which still lay ahead: the hazmat building. Telling her that with the old chief of that department having moved on already to another job somewhere else, they would have little choice but to make an arrangement with Henderson, the last of the rebel leaders. “He’s kind of a feisty little guy, I know. But from what I hear, he’s real good at his job. So I guess we’re gonna have to keep him around, huh?”

Yes, was Gabriela’s response, though not in that exact word. And then a few moments later, as the big man prepared to set out on that final mission alone, she added, “You can do it. I know you can.”

“With a little luck,” his rapid response as he turned to gaze directly into her eyes in a way that he never had in the daylight before. “With a good luck kiss.”

“You wish!” she shot back. You wish... And maybe I wish, too.

With the reconquest complete a short time later and the afternoon rolling slowly by after that, with no more conflict and nothing but the long cleanup and reorganization to occupy his time, Gary’s adrenaline level seemed to fall off steadily. The cheeky and confident man of the moment of victory slowly giving way to the shy, reserved man of the day before. That man who could only speak clearly while avoiding eye contact.

And in fact his reticence while in Gabriela’s presence had risen so dramatically by the time the workday was nearing its end that finally it was up to her to take the lead. Up to her to go out looking for him as the long, slow twilight was getting well underway, asking him as he stood

before her glancing about nervously, “You’re going to see me home?” And implying through the tone in which she spoke that they were in for another long walk despite the fact that she already knew better. “You’re going to make sure I’m safe?”

“Oh yeah. A course!”

“Well get ready. I’m going.”

She and O’Hara were going, to be more correct. Much to Gary’s surprise as the old man led them out to his car a few minutes later. With the ship still in port and cargo still being worked, though with his own day finished since by then Chu had taken over the night shift at the planning office. And the big man had a quizzical look on his face as he got into the backseat without a word, took no part in the conversation between the two in front as they drove along. And he still said nothing when O’Hara pulled to a stop in the parking lot of the marina, asking only with his eyes, So what now? Why did you bring me along, and what do I do now?

“Come,” said Gabriela with a slight wave of her hand. “Come, I’m not there yet.”

The big guy hung back yet again as they neared the little gate, looking about as though unsure what to say or do or even to think. Until finally Gabriela spoke once again and made it all so very clear. “Come inside. Please. We can eat,” she said while silently marveling at her own audacity. Bringing this man into her home in such a blatant act of seduction, an act so unlike anything she had ever done before... Except that one time many years ago, of course.

None of the crew were in sight as the two of them climbed the gangway to the *Lady G*, the biggest and most impressive vessel in the entire marina. Tied up at the far end of the dock since that was the only place a vessel her size could fit. There was no one to hear them as Gary looked around and said, “Wow, this sure is some yacht ya got here,” no one to see them as they descended the ladder into the galley to find out what the cook Renee had left for Gabriela’s supper. No one to listen in or to interfere as their quiet conversation grew ever more intimate with each passing minute. Became ever more the talk of lovers.

And then finally after clearing off the table, as Gabriela stood rinsing the plates in the sink, Gary came up behind her and put his big hands on her shoulders. Just as she had been hoping that he would. He spoke softly while giving her a gentle massage, Gabriela practically melting at his touch.

Oh yes, that’s right, she said to herself as she went on with her work at the sink. That’s right, as she turned to face him at last, her arms around him and her face raised for the first kiss. That’s right, that’s so, so right.

Pulling back and pushing herself free some moments later, she pointed with her head before leading the way into the owner’s cabin. The closing of the door and another embrace, another long, lingering kiss while his hands began to work their way over her body. Big and hard and moving clumsily as though he had no idea what he was doing. No idea what it is that a woman likes.

No, not like that, she spoke to herself again as she grabbed the back of one of his hands and placed it on her breast. Like this, she said as she began to move that hand slowly in the way that it should be moved. Like this, like this. Oh yes, like this.

THE LOVER

Gabriela knew from the moment she awoke the next morning that Gary was going to be living with her aboard the *Lady G* for a long time to come. She knew it even before the man beside her was awake himself. Before the soft, “Hello,” and the gentle kiss and the not-so-gentle kiss and the passionate kiss, followed by a, “Not now,” on her part. There wasn’t time, and besides people would hear them.

The crew who were already going to be in for quite a shock as it was when they found out that a man had spent the night in her cabin. The first man to do so since the death of... you know who. And so she had a certain apprehension as to their reactions: the polite comments and the searching looks, and of course the gossip that would surely follow once her back was turned. And then worst of all, there were the anything-but-polite comments that were bound to come her way from her uncle. The pleas for decency and reminders of her Catholic upbringing, the insults and the name-calling and who knew what else that old man might...

“Ya know, you’re the most beautiful woman I ever met in my life,” Gary said as he rolled back and lay propped up on one elbow.

“Beautiful, me?” Gabriela had never felt comfortable with compliments of that sort. Especially not when the possibility of ulterior motives was so obvious.

“Yeah, beautiful and sexy and desirable, and such a great person...”

“You need to take a shower,” she cut him off as she slid over and got out of bed herself, with no final kiss, no tender goodbye.

And then as she grabbed her robe and entered the bathroom to stand facing the mirror a moment later, she repeated her earlier question to herself. Beautiful, me? It was a hard concept for her to get her head around. Because while there may have been days when she could believe it, days when she would see a beautiful woman staring back at her in the mirror, those days were few and far between. Greatly outnumbered by all the other days when she saw nothing but herself in that glass. Not beautiful and not ugly, but simply the face that was always there. The same face that had been looking back at her for years.

Gary seemed to know better than to intrude upon her in that private little lair, their intimacy not yet at such a level, and so it wasn’t until she was finished in the bathroom and getting herself dressed that he ever started in on his own morning cleanup. Still in the shower when she was ready to head into the galley for coffee and breakfast, and to do what she could to prepare the way before the crew laid eyes upon her new man.

“Good morning,” she said to Renee as she entered the galley and grabbed the coffee pot. “We have one more today.”

“One more...?”

“Yes, one more person. A man,” she added matter-of-factly.

“Oh, a man...” Renee said in a knowing voice. The dots already connected in her mind, it appeared. And in fact, her tone was so clear and so expressive that when the other occupant of that room turned Gabriela’s way and said hello, he had the same knowing look on his face. Exactly the same as his wife.

Captain Rob as they called him aboard the *Lady G*, though the title was purely honorific given his paucity of qualifications for the job. There for no other reason than his long-time friendship with Roy. Because he was another of those kind and friendly old men who always seemed to gravitate toward that big, good-hearted man during his lifetime. Though unlike in the majority of cases, Rob was a man so ill-prepared for the job and so ineffectual—such a loser as the unkind would label him—that he had been given his position aboard the big schooner more out of charity than anything else. His temporary position, at least. Captain as long as the *Lady G* sat beside the dock where his lack of competence could do little harm, though once the actual voyage began, that would be the end of his command. The time for the real captain to take over, the real leader. Roy it was to have been before, though now that he was dead...

In the meantime Captain Rob had one big saving grace, which was the fact that his wife Renee was an excellent cook. So that as those two grey-hairs divided their labor in the typical old-fashioned way, with the man as captain and the woman as cook, at least they were strong in one of those areas. Rob and Renee, a name-pairing which flowed easily off the tongue though which in fact owed its very existence to Rob’s wishy-washy nature since before he met Renee, he had always been known as Bob. Before the two of them were married in middle age, neither for the first time, and before Renee told him that he should change it since Rob would go so much better with her own name. And so it was only from that point on that he ever became known as Rob. Mr. Renee to the less than charitable.

There was no one else in sight that day as Gabriela looked around the galley and dining area of the main cabin, up the passageway leading forward past the guest cabins. With no sign of her uncle at that early morning hour, and with none of the other crewmembers to be seen either, none of those young people who made up the remainder of the crew. Young men for the most part though there had been a few women among them over the years, all of them coming and going and never sticking around for very long since they worked for little more than room and board and the promise of being in on the big cruise around the world. Because once those “volunteers” would become aware of the fact that the departure date of the cruise was constantly being put off and pushed ever further into the future, they would soon grow discouraged and move on to other things. To be replaced by other, not yet disillusioned young people.

Seeing that for the moment she had only those two polite and rather reserved old people to deal with, Gabriela said nothing more about her guest as she sat down at the table with her coffee. Doing her best to act nonchalant and to give the impression that for her it was no big

deal. Just a man, that was all. A new man in her life. Though as she looked at the expressions etched upon the faces of her aged companions, she could see that it was indeed a big deal for the two of them. Her first lover since the day she was widowed. And then as the big man made his appearance some minutes later, she could hear it in their low exclamations of surprise at the dramatic entrance which he made in spite of himself.

Because while Gary may have come through the door in as casual and low-key a way as possible, still his mere physical presence was enough to set off minor shockwaves. His size as he ducked his head to keep from hitting the low overhead, his manly bearing despite the lowered head, and his striking good looks as his handsome face lit up, his blue eyes shining. "Hi there," he said to Rob, the nearer of the two as he entered. "My name's Gary," he extended his hand in greeting.

"Rob," the captain said, slightly breathless as he shook hands. "And that's Renee," he went on, indicating his wife who stood over the stove.

"Mornin' ma'am."

"Good morning," she practically gushed, even more affected by the sight than was her husband. The sight of a man who was so big and impressive yet so modest and unassuming in the way he spoke. So down to earth.

After a big breakfast during which Renee kept asking Gary if he wanted more, kept piling food onto his plate, Gary and Gabriela set out on their long walk to the terminal in the pre-dawn twilight, with a fine drizzle coming down upon them. A slight rain for which her raingear was more than adequate, while as for him, he simply toughed it out. And as the two of them walked along, the conversation between them soon began to flow in a way that it hadn't before. Free and easy, and with Gary so much more open this day than on previous days that he was actually willing to answer a few questions about himself when asked. Answer them with more than single word replies. Though even now as he spoke, he did so with a strange air of reluctance in his voice, as though he had no real interest in the subject and no desire to discuss his own past. So that while he could wax enthusiastic when the two of them discussed ideas or events or even places he had been, people he had known, his level of engagement would fall off rapidly whenever the focus began to draw in more directly upon himself. With that shyness of his making a comeback, or at least that thing which she had taken for shyness up until then. That... that humility or that... Whatever it may have been.

He had no problem when it came to discussing Gabriela and her life, however. Her past struggles and her future plans. And he would grow almost giddy each time that the subject of the *Lady G* and the great adventure came up. "Wow, that sure is gonna be somethin'," he blurted out more than once, a childlike enthusiasm in his voice as he spoke. "That sure is gonna be some trip ya got planned there. Sailin' all the way around the world and hittin' all the good places along the way."

Yes, it was going to be something all right, said Gabriela to herself. It was going to be the realization of her long-time dream. So that as soon as she could get her financial situation in order, as soon as she could find the right man...

“Today when we go back, I can get a ride, I’m sure,” she said all at once as they neared the end of their walk, with the main gate to the terminal in sight after the long, looping route they had taken to get there. “So we can meet back at my home, okay? My boat. You can get your things and bring them with you. And that way tonight you can change your clothes and shave...” and brush your teeth, she added to herself.

As they approached the gate a few minutes later, they were met with a sour look from the Sorensen man on duty. His second-in-command or at least one of his true believers, to judge by the uniform the guy wore, with the fancy store-bought badge and the big cross and even a few stars here and there. And then as the guard suddenly stepped into their path, he spoke in an insolent, insulting tone. “So you’re the one who’s been stealin’ our jobs, huh?”

“Stealin’ your...?”

“Them jobs over at the other gate where you’re keepin’ them scabs around.”

“Scabs!? They’re not scabs!” Gary’s voice rose quickly at the sound of that word. “They’re a good bunch-a guys is what they are. And besides, I promised em I’d take care of em...”

“By stealin’ our jobs!” The guard’s voice was rising as well. “You and that...”

“You shut up about her!!” Gary was on him before he could finish the insult, grabbing the front of the man’s shirt and raising a big fist into his face. “You don’t ever say anything about her again! Ya got that!? Nothin’!! You don’t say one word.”

The guard said nothing back, a look of astonishment, fear having come over his face.

“Cause if I ever hear that you been sayin’ shit like that about her again, you’re gonna be outa here. Ya got me? In one piece or however many it takes to carry ya away. So you just shut the fuck up!” Gary paused for a moment as still the other man said nothing. “And the only thing you’re ever gonna say to her is, ‘Good mornin’ ma’am,’ and that’s it. Cause if ya ever say anything else...”

As the guard stood unresisting, a hangdog look having replaced the fear which had earlier replaced the insolence, Gary released his grip at last. Reached for Gabriela’s arm and began to lead her inside before turning back to issue one final warning. “And you tell that to your boy Sorensen, too, ya hear me? You tell it to everyone. Tell em that no one messes with this lady or else he answers to me. And he answers big-time!”

Their greeting as they entered the main office turned out to be better than the one at the gate had been. Not that there was anything warm or friendly about it, but it was simply the fact that there was no display of open hostility. Nothing but quiet looks and a couple of slight nods, though without a spoken salute of any kind. The greeting of people who may not have liked what they saw, though they must have felt themselves too weak and downtrodden by then to offer any further resistance, so that instead there was nothing but a silent sizing-up.

And of all the people present in the big room that day, the only one to come up and speak with them was the janitor, holding a small jar of paint for the recently repaired door to the manager's office. "G'mornin' ma'am, mornin' sir. I'm all ready to go, but I just gotta know what name ya want me to put on the door."

"Name...?" It was Gary who replied.

"Yeah, you know. Your name. Mr...."

"D'ya gotta put a name? Can't ya just write Manager?"

"No, cause we always put the name, too, so I need... You know, Mr...."

"Mister? I ain't no Mister," Gary sounded impatient all at once, perhaps a bit peeved. "My father's a Mister, but not me. I'm just Gary."

"Mr. Gary...?" the janitor said in a confused tone.

"No, not Mr. Gary! Just plain Gary, with nothin' else. Gary!"

"But I can't write that..."

"Okay then don't! Just write Manager on the door like what I told ya before. With no name. Just Manager."

"Come. Let's begin," Gabriela cut in as the conversation between the two men appeared to have arrived at its conclusion or at least at its final impasse. And then after leading the way into Gary's new office, recently cleaned and straightened up, she turned to face him. "Well, this is it," she said in an expansive tone as visions of a bright and hopeful future danced before her inner eye.

Though as she noticed the expression on the face of the man with her, she quickly came to realize that those visions weren't shared by him. That big man who stood glancing everywhere around the room, at the desk and the computer and the filing cabinets and the piles of paper everywhere, absolutely everywhere, his eyes wide and half-filled with shock, half with a look of bewilderment in its purest form.

"This is it...?" His voice trailed off as he continued to look around, until suddenly it returned as his gaze turned directly at her. "So whatta I do? What am I supposed to do?"

"Do? You... You do what you want. Whatever you want," Gabriela tried to put as positive a spin on things as she could in light of such obvious signs of distress. "Remember, you're the boss. You're in charge."

"Yeah, but I mean... I never used one-a those things before," he pointed at the computer as he spoke, and then waving his arm at the piles of paper, he went on, "And all that stuff..."

“Oh that? You just read it is all... You read the important ones,” she added an instant later as she saw his eyes grow wider still. “You read... Let’s see, you read this one... Some of this one... This one...” She began to go through the nearest pile of papers as she spoke, pulling out the most important files and reports and setting them in one stack while pushing the others aside. “This one and this one...”

But then as she raised her eyes for a moment only to see that the look of alarm on the man’s features went on unabated as he stared at the growing stack of required reading, she soon made another attempt at positive spin. “And you know, you can always go out and visit other places, too. You can drive around and check on things.” Or at least he would be able to do so once the manager’s pickup truck was out of the garage, the damage from Sorensen’s raids repaired.

“I don’t know...” his only reply.

“Oh yes, you can do it. I know you can. And remember, you’re the boss so there’s no hurry about...” Her eyes fell back toward the piles of paper.

“Take your time. There’s no hurry,” she said a short time later after having coaxed Gary to take a seat at the desk at last. With a promise to teach him about computers at some later date and with the papers all arranged, most urgent reports on top. “You have all the time you need,” she assured him again and then again as she eased her way toward the door. Telling him between soft, plaintive moans on his part that she had work to do in her own office so that she had to go for now, though she would be back later, don’t worry about that.

Until finally as she turned to leave, the big man starting to paw his way unenthusiastically through the stacks of paper before him, she could hear him mutter to no one in particular. “Man, this is crazy... This is... It can’t be, man. It can’t be...”

Entering her own little office a moment later, Gabriela had nothing to do, no reports to read and no reason even to turn on the computer, just as she had known all along despite what she had been saying to Gary. Nothing to do but to pick up the telephone and start calling South America, that is. To start dialing that phone where the connection was so much better and cheaper than it was on the pay-phone back at the marina, and to use it to call every sister she could find. Because suddenly there was so much for them to discuss. A new man in her life, a new lover such as she hardly could have imagined only days before. And then of course there was the terminal where so many of the old problems had been straightened out, most of them in a single day. And that’s not to mention the *Lady G* where suddenly everything was back on track now that she had finally found the man she had been looking for. She hoped. A man with whom she could sail off into the sunset...

With so many things to talk over with so many different sisters that she knew the morning of that day would be only the beginning. A first installment in what could prove to be days of hot-and-heavy discussion as she spent hours on the phone with Marta alone, meanwhile setting up appointments with the others for that afternoon or the next day. Opportunities to talk and talk and discuss her future with those women whose opinions and advice meant so much more to her than anyone else’s ever could. Opportunities to talk and talk and talk and talk...

And it wasn't until the clock in her office signaled that lunchtime had arrived that she ever put down the phone from her aching ear and rose to her feet, stepped out into the main office on her way to find Gary. As she entered that big room and began to look around, though, she soon discovered to her surprise that Bowman had made his return during her absence. The man standing there with a contented look on his face, neat and clean and even a bit dapper in the fresh-looking sport coat and tie that he wore, all of it in stark contrast to his appearance the last time she had seen him. And even the half-crazed glint of recent weeks seemed to have disappeared from his eyes as he smiled at her and said, "Hello," in the way that he would have said it weeks earlier. Back before all the trouble.

The changes so sudden and so dramatic that as Gabriela looked the man over, she could offer little more than a mumbled greeting in reply, asking herself at the same time if what she was seeing could possibly be real. If this could be the same man who had slunk out of that office the day before, disheartened and defeated and disheveled.

"Yeah, he's back all right," Gary responded to her query as the two of them were on their way to one of the picnic tables under the awning outside, the sack lunches Renee had prepared for them in their hands. "He's kinda cocky, too. At first anyway."

"At first?"

"Yeah, but he's okay now, cause we went and... like... The two of us went and made this kind of a deal."

"A deal? What sort of deal?" Gabriela asked in the first of many questions she would be throwing the man's way over the next half hour as the two of them sat and ate lunch together. The first of many attempts to glean what information she could about the long talk which those two men had held in the manager's office that morning while she had been busy on the phone. She asked the big man question after question, though given the short, minimalist nature of the explanations which he had to offer in return, she found herself still struggling to comprehend the details of that morning's events even as the meal came to an end. Still trying to piece together a coherent narrative from the man's brief and unrevealing answers.

With only the starting point of those events clear beyond any serious doubt. Bowman's arrival at the office somewhere around mid-morning and his apology for having gone "a little bit crazy" at being passed over for the manager's position, as Gary phrased it. Though evidently the man already had enough of an attitude going even at that early stage of their discussion to where he had soon reminded his new chief that he was still the head of the business and finance department at the terminal and that he still had his rights and privileges. His right first of all to demand the immediate reinstatement of those people of his who had been fired. The return of Maggie, the one truly innocent victim of the day before, her only sin the location of her desk which had made her into the first target, so that in her case Gary had quickly relented. Though when it came to the question of Tony Baloney, "That little weasel," as Gary referred to him, there was to be no backing down. Meeting Bowman halfway on that issue just as he did when the two of them went on from there to discuss people from other departments who had been fired the day before. Saying yes to some and no to others.

What exactly came next, though, how exactly the conversation evolved from that point on, was never very clear to Gabriela since she had little more than the final outcome on which to base her conclusions. And so she could only speculate about how it was that the two of them ever managed to arrive at what would prove to be the key moment in their negotiations. The moment in which Gary had virtually surrendered to his recently defeated foe. Admitted all at once that he was way over his head in his new position, with no clue about what was going on and no other option but to hand that whole end of the operation right back to Bowman—business and finance and paperwork in general—and in that way to create a strange new division of labor between those two men. One in which Bowman would run the show in the office while Gary would take care of operations and relations with the other departments, serving as little more than a figurehead while seated at his desk.

And in fact Gary had gone so far at some point as to have offered the other man whatever title he may choose: deputy manager or co-manager. Gary didn't care. "They're just words, ya know. They don't mean anything." Not to him anyway, those words over which Bowman had fought so hard and so obsessively.

And so the final result of that long discussion had been a rather weird sort of peace agreement, it seemed to Gabriela. One in which the supposed victor of the day before had thrown away so much of what he had gained that it was hard to say anymore who the actual winner had been. Or even to say who was actually running the show now, whether it was the new manager or the smiling and confident co-manager Gabriela had witnessed.

After a full afternoon spent on the telephone with her sisters, a ride back to the marina from one of the women she knew, Gabriela stepped aboard the *Lady G* to find that the big yacht was more crowded than usual at that hour of the evening, with the three young men who made up the crew at that time hanging around in a way that they rarely did. Hanging around in hopes of seeing her new man, evidently, since they surely must have heard about him from Rob and Renee. There was Justin along with the other two, Mike and Chris or something like that, a couple of guys who had such common names and who looked so much like all the others who had come and gone over the years that it was hard for her to tell which was which. Unlike Justin who was one of the few memorable people they'd ever had aboard. And he was memorable not simply because of the fact that he looked so different from the usual sea of white faces, being half white and half Asian to judge by the looks of him, though with the exact nationality of either half being less than clear. No, Justin was memorable because of the whole way he was, the whole way he lived and talked and acted. So upbeat and the sort of free spirit rarely found in that over-serious generation of his. A guy who could break into song or dance at any moment, pull a joke when you least expected it. And he was someone who seemed to brighten any room he entered simply by being there, to lighten any atmosphere and liven up any gathering.

Looking around at those inquisitive young faces, Gabriela saw no sign of her uncle, however. No sign of that grumpy old man who must have locked himself up inside his cabin already as he did every evening. Either from lack of interest in seeing his big new shipmate or else, in a more likely scenario, he wasn't there that day because he still didn't know. Because given the strained relations which existed between him and the others, especially Captain Rob, no one had bothered to speak to him and tell him about the new arrival.

Gabriela soon took a seat in the main cabin and waited there for her man to come while the youngsters did their best to make their vigil inconspicuous by remaining up on deck in the rainless evening air. And it was only after many minutes had passed, minutes of sitting and looking around and thumbing through a yachting magazine which someone had left on the table, that Gabriela ever saw or heard anything more from those young men. One of them coming down the ladder all at once and approaching her. "There's some guy with a seabag standin' by the gate wavin' at us," said Mike-or-Chris, whichever of the two he may have been.

Oh, that's right. He doesn't have the key, she said to herself as she quickly got up and went to let him in. Walking back down the floating dock a minute later with Gary by her side while three pairs of youthful eyes peered at them from the deck. Stared in an even less discreet way than they usually did when she was around, though on this occasion their attention was clearly focused upon the big man rather than her.

"Hi there. How's it goin'?" My name's Gary," he addressed the group as he boarded, his eyes singling out Justin as though through some instinct.

Justin with whom he seemed to establish such an instant rapport despite their father-son age difference that within minutes the two of them were talking like a couple of old friends. Making jokes and laughing mildly while discussing their pasts and their future plans in the most circuitous and unrevealing ways imaginable. "So where ya from?" "Here and there, man. Here and there." "Yeah, I can dig it. That's where I'm from, too."

Those two talked while the others mostly just listened, and then the whole group of them followed along as Gary set out for the main cabin, off to eat what would be his and Gabriela's less-than-private evening meal. With the three young men sitting or standing around "keeping them company" during the whole time they ate, and with the conversation between the two leading lights of that little gathering threatening to drag on all night. Slowly evolving from jokes and unanswered personal questions into a long discussion of movies and music and the current state of youth culture. And all the while that those men talked, they seemed to have gone tone-deaf to Gabriela and her ever less subtle hints about her desire for privacy. Only her big new lover showing any signs of catching on after a while, catching the significance of those meaningful looks which she kept sending his way from across the table. But then even as he began to drop a few hints of his own, still the others went on as though they failed to notice. Still they hung around and hung around. And it wasn't until the meal was finally over, as their hosts got up and started to clear the table, that those younger men ever seemed to get the message, exchanging glances among themselves before saying their goodnights and filing out. And leaving Gabriela alone with her man as she had been so longing to be.

Alone at last! The two lovers were in each other's arms the instant they were inside the owner's cabin, the instant the door was closed behind them. They were clutching at each other as all the pent up tension came bursting out. A kiss and then another as Gary's hands went to work. The breasts, the back, the butt, before zeroing in on the vagina. Moving gently and caressing tenderly in a show of just how fast a learner he was. And sending her higher and higher with each passing moment as she panted with pleasure. Undressing her while she undressed him at the same time, fumbling with buttons in the fever of the moment. Kissing and groping and kissing some more until finally they were falling onto the bed for an orgasm that could wait no longer, a

screaming orgasm such as she had never known before. “*Si! Si! O, si-i-i!*” Her English failing her as she screamed for everyone to hear.

“Wow,” was all she could say as she lay on her back afterwards. “Wow.” Her face a bit raw from the unshaven face which had just been rubbing against it, though with every other part of her body tingling. “Wow.”

And it wasn’t until after some minutes had passed that Gary raised himself up to speak. “Ya know, I’m not sure what you’re gettin’ me into down there at work, but whatever it is, it’s sure worth it spendin’ this time with you. Cause you’re like... I don’t know. It’s like... It’s like I been dreamin’ about you my whole life or somethin’. Ya know? Like you’re the one.”

“Oh, wait until tomorrow. You’ll feel different.” Gabriela wanted to cut him off. All that mushy stuff which she could talk about with her sisters, though not with a man. Not with this man when he was so close to her right then.

“Will ya marry me?” he went on undeterred.

“Marry you? Don’t be silly. No one gets married anymore.”

Come morning Gabriela was back on her way to the terminal, walking beside her new lover in the dim morning light and with enough topics for sisterly discussion on her mind to keep herself busy for another full day. Especially when it came to Cristina with whom she had yet to speak. But then as she looked at the weeks and months ahead, she knew that this pattern was about to change, knew that these daily trips were about to end, to become weekly or something of the sort. Just often enough for her to keep in touch with her family. And then on all those other days when she had no calls to make, she would be spending her time and energies working on her true love instead, her dream. She would be spending them aboard the *Lady G* where there was so much to be done over the next few months before the arrival of spring. Painting and renewing rigging and sails, laying in spare parts for the auxiliary engine and...

A dry-docking! That’s right, the *Lady G* was going to need a dry-docking before they could set out, a chance to haul her out of the water and then scrape and inspect and repaint the hull. That had to be done, and it had to be done before spring. And you know with only one floating dry-dock in town capable of handling that big, beautiful schooner of hers, with all the competition there was likely to be for its use from fishing trawlers, even ferries, there was no time left to lose. She would have to call them up that very day and reserve a place in line if she wanted to have everything ready to go by spring. Ready to sail off into the sunset...

As she walked along with her thoughts so focused upon that glorious future, that dream which was about to come true, the terminal and its affairs seemed to be fading rapidly into the past, growing ever more distant despite the fact that she was drawing physically nearer with each step she took. Her thoughts, her emotions, they were abandoning that place in a rush, leaving behind that site of old battles which had now been won. Most of them anyway. Old battles which it would be impossible for her ever to fight again, she knew. Old battles which... Oh please Gary, I hope you can do it for me, because if you can’t, it would be so... And I know that you didn’t ask for any of this, she soon found herself apologizing silently to the man beside her. I

know you didn't want to take on all those responsibilities and all that... But you know you were the only hope I had left. My only, only hope.

When it came time to head for home that afternoon, Gary led the way out to the manager's pickup truck which was finally out of the repair shop. He got inside and drove her back to the marina in that vehicle which he had apparently laid claim to in some male, territorial sort of way such as Gabriela had never dared to do in her own earlier attempts to establish her authority. He had taken it as a simple perk of his new position. With no thought of rights or privileges, not even a mention of either concept as he offered her a brief explanation of his actions during the ride home. Barely any mention of the truck at all, in fact, as instead he talked about the pager which he had found in a desk drawer the day before. Talked about how as manager, he had to be ready to respond to any emergency calls that might come in from one department or another, perhaps from O'Hara or Chu who switched off between day- and night-shift at the planning office so that one of them was always there when a ship was being worked. Had to be ready to go charging down to the terminal at any time of the day or night, driving there of course since that way he could get there a whole lot faster than he could by walking.

Whatever! Gabriela said in response. Said it to herself, in any case. Do what you want. Because all I really care about anymore is that place we're heading for now. The marina and the *Lady G* and the crew and... My uncle! Gary had yet to meet that unpleasant old man, didn't he? And with the next day being Saturday, with the two of them staying aboard all day, those men were bound to run into each other sooner or later. Gary walking in on the old man all at once and...

"You need the truck for tomorrow, right?" Suddenly she wanted to buy herself some time. Needed to buy some time. "There's a ship in, you know."

"A ship...?" Gary practically whined when he said it, though in the end he agreed to go, however reluctantly. Agreed that it was his duty as manager to be there for a few hours at least.

And to give Gabriela the time she would need to prepare the way with that uncle of hers, she hoped. Time to have a nice long talk with that crazy old man, that... Or it wasn't so much that he was crazy, it was just... He was just...

He was her Uncle José was all. José Antonio as he sometimes called himself, though she wasn't sure where that second name came from since it hadn't been given to him by his parents. He was a man she had never met until the previous year when he showed up on her doorstep all at once—the gangway of the *Lady G*. Coming there from out of nowhere for all she could tell, and a man who could be so stubbornly uncommunicative on certain subjects that even after all the time he had been living with her, still his past remained as much a mystery to her as it was to everyone else in the family.

So obscure that the only things Gabriela could say for certain were that he was the older brother of her mother and that he had left their home for the United States many years earlier. Back before Gabriela was even born. Suddenly disappearing one day under circumstances so unclear that in place of an explanation, all the family ever had to go on were rumors. Stories about him leaving to escape a murder charge or a jealous husband, stories about him going off to

make his fortune in Hollywood or on Wall Street. Or in what was probably the most common of all the rumors, there were stories about him going off to work for the CIA, committed anti-communist that he was known to be. One who might even have played some role in the Bay of Pigs invasion which took place within a year or two of his departure, not to mention all the other covert operations which that agency had carried out over the succeeding years. Though was he actually there? Did he actually take part in that failed invasion of Cuba? Or was he anywhere else at all in the decades that followed? No one in the family could say since they heard so little from him. Occasional letters which tended to be so cryptic as to reveal almost nothing about himself or his life. And then there were the Christmas cards, always printed in English so that only the short personal note at the end would be intelligible to those who didn't read that language.

As far as Gabriela knew, though, there hadn't been a single sighting in the flesh in over thirty years before that day when Uncle José suddenly appeared at the foot of the gangway to the *Lady G*, looking bedraggled and with hardly a penny in his pocket as he came to visit that "favorite niece" he had never met. Came to throw himself upon her charity, to be more correct, since whatever good fortune he may once have enjoyed in life had clearly deserted him by that time. Left him broke though far from broken since despite the grave financial setbacks which he must have suffered over recent years, he still had his sense of pride fully intact. Proud and defiant as he went on fighting for what he saw as the right, just as he always had. Fighting for what most people would term the Ultra Right.

And so with his views on social and political issues as predictable as they were, as sure to be shared with all comers at maximum volume, Gabriela felt a special urgency to prepare the ground in his case. A need to prepare that old man for the shock which he was about to receive when he learned about her new live-in lover. A good Catholic girl such as her...

"I have a new man," she told her uncle in Spanish when she saw him that morning for the first time in days.

"Good, it's about time," José replied in the bastardized Spanish he spoke after so many decades spent in an English speaking country. "You're still young. You need a man. Children."

"He's living with me. Here. Together."

"Here?" The old man turned to look around the room. "Where?"

"Right here. On this boat," Gabriela said in a firm voice as she prepared herself for the coming wave of abuse. Whore! Prostitute! And whatever other names were about to come raining down upon her as her uncle's disbelief began to fade and he responded to what he was sure to see as a direct challenge to his morality.

"Like a whore, you mean?" he said at last, though with none of the fire in his voice that Gabriela had been expecting, none of the intensity as the phrase came out weakly, almost softly instead. Like the old man said it more from force of habit than he did from any real passion or any conviction that his words might make the least difference.

And then when Gary appeared on the scene a couple hours later, Uncle José's reaction fell even further outside the range of her expectations. With no sign of anger or moral condemnation. Nothing but a low whistle and a soft, "*Caramba*," as he gazed up at the big man, a knowing smile on his face as he reached out and shook the proffered hand. "Hello, glad to meet you," he said in a tone of quiet admiration or something of the sort. As though he looked up to this fellow-man somehow, this fellow-hunter as he would have termed it during one of his more philosophical moments. This man who had simply been doing those things that men are expected to do, hunting and conquering. Returning now to the site of his latest triumph. Returning to the home of that woman who apparently bore all the blame in the old man's mind since she had failed so miserably in what for him was the central duty of her gender. She had failed to defend her chastity.

And so rather than the fireworks which she had been fearing, Gabriela found that instead a strange sort of bonding seemed to take place between those two men who appeared so different on the outside. Between that big, strong man and that scrawny old man. Her Uncle José who had gotten none of his sister's good looks, made to appear even homelier now in his bitter old age by the scowl that was constantly upon his face, almost as though it were a permanent feature. Always there until now when she saw the old sourpuss smile for the first time ever, his face muscles practically creaking as they moved into that long-unaccustomed position.

And he smiled more broadly all the time as the big man smiled back at him, listened when he spoke rather than turning to walk away like what anyone else aboard that vessel would have done—even his niece at times—and gave him some of the attention which he must have been craving ever since he came aboard. So that while the big man may not have said, "You're right," when José spoke, at least the guy allowed him to air his opinions in a way that no one else had. Allowed him to rant about whatever subject came into his mind over the next few minutes. Smiling back politely and even nodding his head a few times, and making that old man the happiest he had been in a long, long time.

With the arrival of Monday morning, it came time to begin the new pattern which their lives were to follow over the coming weeks and months. One in which Gary would head off to the terminal alone while Gabriela would stay aboard the *Lady G* where preparations for the big adventure were moving slowly ahead. And it was only on those days when she had accumulated enough sisterly talking points to make a full day on the telephone worthwhile that she ever returned to her former place of work. Sat for hours in her little office, with a break at some point to go visit an old friend or two, perhaps, though never anything more than that. No effort to play a role or even to stay informed about the day-to-day operations of that little world in which she had formerly spent so much time.

With so little interest now that on those evenings when Gary would come home wanting to talk about the events taking place at the terminal, it would be hard for her to pay any real attention to the things he said. The issues, the conflicts about which he spoke too far from her own thoughts and feelings by that time. Too far off in the fast-receding past as she had moved on so completely to other, more pleasant things. And so as that man of hers would talk and moan and complain about this condition or that event down at the terminal, she would have nothing to offer in return but bland encouragement or quiet words of consolation. Hugs and kisses, even

rapid-onset sex on those worst days when nothing else would do. Those days when the pressures of the job seemed to be eating away at him somewhere deep inside.

When he would pour out his heart about the isolation he felt, the loneliness of power. Because to hear Gary speak, he hadn't made a single friend in that entire terminal. Not one. Referring even to her closest old friends in such coldly correct terms as to reveal no hint of warmth or affection, while as far as the office politics of the place were concerned, they seemed to leave him baffled. Muddled and befuddled. As though the entire concept escaped him. His past experience having taught him so little about human behavior of that sort that he was helpless in face of it. Defenseless. Incapable of the least insight into the types of games being played by all the conflicting egos that surrounded him, the conflicting agendas that constantly buffeted him this way and that. And with his one source of trusted information, Gabriela, always so far away when he needed her most, so clueless when she was near.

And then as though all that weren't bad enough, Gary also had to contend with the problem of Sorensen. That big religious crazy who seemed to be going his own way more than ever in the days and weeks that followed their supposedly mutual victory of late November. He went on listening to no one but that so-called God of his while relentlessly pushing the campaign to spread his power or his religion or whatever it was that motivated him. Whatever his true ambitions may have been. Quietly infiltrating wherever he could find an opening and making steady progress, to hear Gary describe the situation on those evenings when the subject came up. To hear him tell about the Sorensen-style crosses that were starting to appear on the shirts of people outside the security department, people who worked in this shop or that special cargo department. Though whether the people in question were recent converts or whether they had been planted there from Sorensen's own department, Gary couldn't say since he hadn't been at the terminal long enough to know who exactly they were. All he knew was that they were now Sorensenites or whatever they should be called. Part of that slow-moving plot and symbols of the tiny victories which the guy seemed to be winning day by day.

His campaign gaining ground with such low-key persistence that it came as quite a shock to all concerned when suddenly one night in mid-December, Sorensen decided to change his tactics completely. Decided to drop all subtlety and come out instead in a naked grab for power by sending a group of his men to take control of the front gate to the terminal by sheer force. Sending them out on a quiet night when there was only one guard on duty so that within seconds they had chased the guy away, though not before he'd had the time and the presence of mind to make a call to his boss's pager, unfortunately for them.

Time to give Gary his first wake-up call ever and to send him leaping to his feet, instantly alert like one who was accustomed to being called out at any time of the day or night. Dressed and on his way moments later with only an, "It's from the gate," to his weary, half-awake lover.

And he was gone all day after that, not returning home until late in the afternoon when Gabriela finally had a chance to question him. To ask, "What was it?" in her usual halfhearted way, and to hear him reply, "Nothin'," in his usual tight-lipped way. "There was just... There was some trouble down there, but I took care of it."

And so it wasn't until some days later, when she stopped by the planning office to pay a visit to O'Hara, that she ever learned just how much had actually taken place on that night. Her old friend repeating the stories which he had heard from one source or another: Gary's arrival at the gate only to find that the guard on duty had retreated to the safety of the parking lot while the guard shack had been occupied by half a dozen Sorensen men. With no sign of the big troublemaker himself, evidently, only his men. And the decision by that big man of hers to jump into action the moment the guard had finished his tale, to go charging into the guard shack where he had quickly sent that whole group of men fleeing for their lives. A broken nose here and a twisted arm there and a whole lot of screaming and shouting.

His decision to send a loud and clear message to those men and their leader, signed and sealed with his fists. And though it would be hard to say whether that message was effective or not given the strange psychology of the man to whom it was addressed, the one thing Gabriela could say for sure was that there were no more attempts at the use of force by Sorensen over the following weeks and months. No need for Gary to repeat his "lesson" as the front gate remained firmly in his hands from there on out, with only a couple of the weaker links falling away over the next few days. A couple of the guards who worked there quitting in the immediate aftermath, saying something to the effect of, "I didn't sign up for this shit."

After the crisis of that day, there was a period of calm which seemed to descend upon all aspects of life at the terminal during the remainder of the month, even office politics taking a backseat for a time as the holiday season came on. And meanwhile aboard the *Lady G*, things were going so well that they almost seemed to have entered upon an era of good feelings. With Rob and Renee more than happy to have Gabriela spend so much of her time aboard, giving them the attention and direction which their activities had previously lacked, and with Justin and the others in less of a hurry to go out and spend their evenings ashore than what they had been before. More willing to spend their free time hanging out on board now that they knew Gary would be there. That big brother whose own mood would brighten visibly from the moment he caught sight of Justin and the others, his troubles at the terminal forgotten for a little while. And in fact, things were going so well that even Uncle José seemed to be happy or at least a bit less grumpy than usual, knowing as he did that if he ever decided to leave his room in the evening, he could count on finding one friendly face among the crowd. One face that would smile at him even if the guy paid little attention to what he actually had to say. Even if his more political statements would fall flat again and again.

And so with the atmosphere aboard that vessel so happy, so upbeat as Christmas drew near, Gabriela soon decided to make more of the holiday that year than she ever had before. A whole lot more than what she had done for Thanksgiving which had occurred shortly after the big man's arrival. She decided to throw a big-time party, with champagne and a fancy dinner and presents for everyone aboard. And she might have done even more had it not been for the rain that day, coming down so hard that the party had to be restricted to below-decks.

Short on space though long on spirit as that day turned out to be one of the best times she'd had in years, the whole crew celebrating the holiday together while being joined by a number of guests. Renee's grandson and an elderly couple, friends of Rob and Renee who lived on one of the nearby yachts, and a whole group of twenty-somethings who had been invited by the younger crewmembers. The more the merrier, Gabriela had told them when asked if it would

be okay. With so many of those high-spirited young people aboard, crowded together in the main cabin where they laughed and joked and talked in a steady stream, that she hardly noticed the absence of her own invited guests. Cervone and his wife who had been forced to turn down her invitation because of previous family commitments.

And it was a beautiful day all around, a great meal and a wonderful feeling of togetherness and sharing which grew even stronger, more all-embracing, when Justin got out his guitar and began to play a short time after the meal was over. He was quickly joined by a guy who played harmonica and by others who improvised with whatever they could find in the way of percussion instruments. And that's not to mention all the singers, a young lady with a lovely voice and another who couldn't carry a tune, a young guy who sang far off-key and another who did better. All of them taking part in an improvised concert that grew more enthusiastic with each new song they played. Raucous yet at the same time so joyous that only Uncle José complained about the noise and retreated to his room while everyone else stuck around and had a fabulous time. The two elderly couples who smiled benignly from where they sat, and the young people who sang and performed, and of course Gabriela and her man. Gary whose face seemed to glow in a way that she hadn't seen before. Not in the just-had-sex sort of way that it sometimes did in the evenings but in a whole different way.

And that glow had nothing to do with drugs since unlike some of the young people present, he never disappeared into the forward crew's quarters, returning a short time later with bloodshot eyes. He never broke Gabriela's—and previously Roy's—strict no drugs aboard policy even as it went unenforced on that one day. No, the glow in his face seemed to come from somewhere else. Somewhere deep within, behind the curtain of those glazed-over eyes. Somewhere far in his past or perhaps from somewhere deep within his dreams. Carrying him off now to wherever it may have been. Off to that place which Gabriela could never enter, so intimately connected as it was with the man's innermost being, with the very vision he held of who and what he was, who and what he should be. That place all his own which she could never even know.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THE ALL-DAY-ALL-NIGHT PRE- DAWN EXPRESS

Know? How could she know it? How could that female character possibly know where the guy is right now when she doesn't even know where he's been or what he's done? Not in the way that you and I know where he's been. Where he's gone back to now, in his head at least. With his thoughts drifting far, far away in time and space. Especially in time. Drifting back to those days when he was young and alive himself, and not just alive but burning with life in the way that some people are at that age. The way that he was and I was. I don't know about you. Burning with the desire to do it all and see it all and be it all. To live and to feel and to taste and to touch. To cast aside the square world and to leap into that other world instead. That unsquare world, if you know the one I mean. That world in which time flows at the speed of life and not the speed of clocks. Where every moment is its own little forever. Its own here-and-now. Without a past or a future. And without a present either, that thing which the square world calls

the present. So full of reality and punctuality and superficiality, and so lacking in profundity, eternity. Because it's only in the eternal that life can truly be lived. With no thought of outcomes or incomes or any of the rest as you go out and do what you want, go where you want. Go to wherever the spirits take you. North or South or East or West. It doesn't matter. It's all the same direction. It's all over there, somewhere over there, and it doesn't become here until you get there. Driving or hitching or hopping freights. Whatever it takes to get you there, way over there. Rolling and rambling and grooving and grappling. And doing everything that there is to be done along the way. Seeing everything that there is to see and living everything there is to live and being everything that you can be. Being yourself and nothing more. Nothing less. Whatever that self of yours may be. Whether you're a drifter or a dreamer or a saint or a bum, it doesn't matter as long as you're you. As long as you're a person, a real person and not some cardboard cut-out. Not someone else's vision of who and what you should be, but yourself instead. Myself. All of us together in this crazy jumble of sight and sound and smell and taste that we call life. This unsquare life with all its possibilities. All its improbabilities like love and hope and happiness and failure. Happiness in failure if that's what comes your way. If that's what the square world judges your life to be. Because what does it matter what anyone thinks in that other world? So far removed from this world of ours that they can never see it, never be it. Never Experience! this unsquare world with its infinite ways to live and love and Be. Its endless expanses of Here to be explored, its eternal Now in which to explore them. Its here, its now. Its everywhere. Forever.

THE LEADER?

Following the success of her Christmas party, Gabriela decided to throw a New Year's Eve party that year as well, the first time she had done so. The first and the last, she swore to herself afterwards when she saw what a disaster that party became. With problems that had nothing to do with bad weather since nature cooperated on that night in a way that it hadn't during the previous party. It cooperated all too well, if anything. Dry and so unseasonably warm as to draw a crowd far bigger than anything she had anticipated, almost none of them invited.

It all started to go wrong from the very beginning, in fact, when a few yachties, residents of nearby boats, came over to see what was happening while Gabriela and the others were in the process of setting things up. They invited themselves aboard and then stuck around to have a drink or two and to make a bit of noise, and to draw even more of their own kind in the process. To attract more of those people who kept showing up and showing up over the next few hours, making more and more noise all the time and attracting still more until finally it seemed like every yachtie and every street person in that entire section of town was there, drinking and carousing and disturbing the peace. With so many people aboard that they filled the cabin of the *Lady G* and covered her spacious decks, the overflow spreading ever further along the nearby docks while a few foolhardy revelers even took to the rigging. Bawling and boisterous and completely out of control, the whole bunch of them.

And meanwhile Gary, the one person big and imposing enough to have done something about it, was in a strange, dark mood that night. In a funk of some sort which had already begun to manifest itself during the first toast he and Gabriela shared, had she only taken the time to notice. Had she only paid attention to the way in which he spoke his salute to the coming year.

“Yeah, another year.” The words emerging from his mouth in a deeply fatalistic tone, one of quiet dread such as a man would use when referring to a prison sentence which lay ahead. And then with the passage of time and with more drinks, the man’s mood grew nothing but darker. Like he was stewing away in some evil juices which the alcohol brought out in him. He got louder with each drink he took, more aggressive and more easily angered as a side of him began to emerge which Gabriela had never before suspected him of having. Revealing a man she had never imagined him to be.

And what she saw that night was so repulsive, so far from the man she was starting to love, that the only thing she could think to do was to avoid him until he sobered up. To leave him to the company of those local drunks with whom he appeared so eager to associate himself right then, those drunks she had never seen before but who welcomed the big man into their midst with open arms. One of their own, they seemed to say as they all stood around together, sloppy and unsteady on their feet and acting like a bunch of idiots, laughing and yelling and stumbling about in some weird inebriate brotherhood.

Rob and Renee did their best to avoid the big man as well, while Justin looked on as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. And of all those who normally lived aboard the *Lady G*, only Uncle José seemed unoffended by what he saw. José who not only joined the ranks of the drunks himself that night, drinking right out in the open rather than doing so secretly in his room as he did on every other evening, but he soon became the worst of the worst. Even more offensive than the big man himself.

He ran his mouth in a way that he never had before, showing his true colors for the first time ever, it appeared to Gabriela, as the old guy unleashed a whole series of brags and insults and whatever else came to his suddenly unrepressed tongue. He bragged again and again about his pure Castilian blood—a claim which Gabriela had heard before and which she knew to be pure fantasy since after all he was her mother’s brother, his blood no more pure than hers—and he insulted everyone he saw as being less pure than himself. Everyone but Gary, it seemed, as the old lush threw out words like mongrel and halfbreed and nearly got himself into half-a-dozen fights, creeping into the big man’s shadow for protection each time that the latest victim of his verbal abuse responded too aggressively. And all the while he kept stirring things up in any way that he could, pushing people’s buttons and looking for trouble. Or perhaps it was simply attention that he craved.

Though whatever it may have been, it was José who was to ignite the biggest ruckus of the evening when at one point as the party was in full swing, he came charging up onto the deck after a visit below. Looking for Gary while shouting at the top of his lungs, “Perverts! There’s perverts down there. Get rid-a those perverts!”

“Huh? Perverts?” Gary turned at the sound of the man’s voice and began to stumble toward the nearest companionway with a dull, stupid look on his face. “Perverts?”

As she heard the old man’s cries, as she saw the big man’s aggressive reaction, Gabriela grew so alarmed all at once that she quickly set out to follow. Down the ladder into the main cabin where she stopped to watch as the big drunk shoved people here and there, half-falling with each movement he made as he searched for whatever it was that had so alarmed Uncle José.

Looking everywhere but finding nothing until the smaller drunk joined him a moment later and led the way forward up the passageway. Up toward the little foyer outside the crew's quarters.

"What the fuck is this!?" she heard Gary shout as she made her own way forward through the crowd. "What the fuck're ya doin'?"

"You see!! You see!!" Uncle José pointed at something that she couldn't yet see, something around the corner.

"Get the fuck outa here, you assholes. Get the fuck out!"

Arriving at the scene of the crime at last, Gabriela found those two men facing off with another pair of men who stood before them, cowering a bit under the glare of the big man's fury. Two young men, one of whom was Mike-or-Chris, she thought, though it was hard to say for sure in that dimly-lit space.

"You see the perverts. Kissing!!" The old man glanced about to make sure that everyone got his point.

"Get outa here. Get offa this..." Gary began.

Only to be cut off by Gabriela. "What are you saying!?" she jumped in without a second thought as though impelled to do so. Unsure whether she felt more offended by the treatment those two younger men were receiving or by the presumption of that big man in ordering people off her boat without her consent. Her boat! "What's wrong?"

"Those two were..." Gary sounded hesitant all at once, taken aback at her sharp, piercing tone. "They were..."

"So what!!" she cut him off again in a voice loud enough to penetrate his alcohol-addled brain. She hoped. "So what! They weren't hurting anybody, were they?"

And when the man's only reply was a sheepish look, a creeping sense of guilt coming over his face, she soon went on. "You get out! Both of you!!" she yelled at the two drunks as she swung around to face them directly. "And you leave them alone."

"But... But..." was all that the big man managed to whimper before his head dropped and his shoulders drooped, turning meekly away and climbing the ladder up to the foredeck.

"Perverts. They're perverts," the old man added in a still defiant tone before he turned to leave as well. "*Maricones.*"

It didn't take long for word of the incident to spread throughout the vessel, and it took even less time for the people there to begin taking sides. With some of them for and some against, some shouting insults at gays and some insulting anti-gays, and with a few even challenging others to fight. And there was one especially loud woman among them who kept slurring out warnings about curses and celestial condemnation at the top of her lungs. Telling everyone present that she refused to stay in a place where they allowed that sort of thing to go

on, though making no move to carry out her threat. Her promise as far as Gabriela was concerned since she would have liked nothing better right then than for that lady to leave. And to take everyone else with her.

But no, that wasn't to be. The party was to go on and on instead. On until the alcohol-fueled passions of that moment gave way to other subjects and other forms of drunken nonsense. On until the ravages of the wee hours began to take their toll, the ranks growing thinner and thinner as the night progressed and as ever more people left the scene or passed out. On until finally only the hardest of the hardcore drunks remained on their feet, Gary among them.

Still going strong, still drinking whatever he could scrounge up from the near-empty bottles that littered the big yacht even as Gabriela gave up her own struggle to stay awake at last. As she headed for that owner's cabin to which only she had the key and then locked herself inside. Left her beloved *Lady G* to her fate and left that big, obnoxious drunk to fend for himself as well. Left him to spend what little remained of the night wherever he could find the space, on a settee or on the deck of the main cabin in some spot not already occupied by a passed out drunk. While as far as that private room of hers was concerned, he was barred from there until... until... She wasn't sure when.

Getting up the next morning, Gabriela left her room to find Gary still there, still hanging out in that main cabin which reeked so horribly of vomit and spilled alcohol. With bodies scattered about in every available spot, even filling the passageway leading forward, while only he remained somewhat vertical, sitting on the deck in one corner propped up against the bulkheads, a bleary look in his eyes as he gave her a weak smile. And then apparently taking notice of the disgust with which she glanced around the room, soon the big man was on his feet, going over to the sleepers and shaking them awake, kicking a couple of the least responsive while saying to each in turn, "Come on, man, it's morning. It's time to go."

He put on a pot of coffee as the room slowly began to clear, rummaging through cabinets in search of a clean cup and preparing a place for Gabriela at the least-foul-smelling spot along the table. And he worked in silence the whole time, his eyes averted from hers. Not daring to speak until finally as he brought over the coffee. "I'm sorry about last night," he mumbled at last, his eyes downcast.

"Sorry is easy," Gabriela answered in a harsh, unforgiving tone, not ready to accept a repentance so weakly stated.

"Yeah, you're right. You're right... I, uh... I screwed up, huh?"

Yes you sure did, she would have said had she been ready to say anything at all. Ready to ease his burden of guilt by speaking to him again.

"Yeah, I really... I don't know what it was. I guess it was the booze or somethin'. All that drinkin'..."

"They say that alcohol brings out your true self," she shot back in an almost automatic response. With no thought of the words' impact until after she saw the startled look that came over the man's face.

“Geez, I hope not,” he said more to himself than to her. “I sure as hell hope not.” And then after a long pause, he went on in a more outwardly directed tone. “No, it can’t be that. Not all of it anyway. Cause like with those guys makin’ out. That wasn’t me. That wasn’t...”

“No?”

“No, cause I got nothin’ against gay people. I got... I mean, I’m not like that. You know I’m not. But it was just that... It was like in the heat-a the moment or somethin’, ya know. Like with the way José was yellin’ all that stuff...”

That’s right, blame it on someone else, Gabriela said to herself, though she said nothing aloud. Nothing as that man went on with his wordy penance. His whining, she began to realize as she listened to him drone on and on over the next few minutes. Apologizing and making excuses and... whining.

And then as though that long attack of self-pity hadn’t been bad enough already, along came Justin as they were finishing their breakfast of coffee and toast. Justin who never looked the big man’s way when he said hello, saluting only Gabriela. His eyes and words for her alone until finally Gary just had to butt in. “Hey man, I’m sorry about last night. Sorry about the way I... You know, the way I acted like such an asshole...”

“Yeah, ya sure did!” There was heat in Justin’s tone, the heat of betrayed trust.

“Cause it’s like... You know, the way I went and got so drunk and like...”

“What ya did to Chris wasn’t cool, man. It wasn’t cool!”

“No...?”

“No! It wasn’t cool.”

“I’m not cool. He says I’m not cool,” Gary resumed his whining once Justin had left, once he and Gabriela were alone again. Acting as though that silly little word had somehow wounded him more deeply than anything else could have done. “Am I cool?” he asked in a pathetic tone. “I’m cool, aren’t I? I’m cool.”

Gabriela hardly knew what to think of the man anymore in light of his drunken escapades of the night before, his sloppy self-doubt of that morning. She didn’t know if she should love him or loathe him for those signs of weakness. Didn’t know if she should hug him and tell him that it would be okay or else laugh in his face. Forgive him now or make him pay an even higher price before he could regain her favor.

Though forgive him she would have to in the end since she needed him to run the terminal, if for nothing else. Because the thought of sending him away, taking the place back over and trying to run it herself? Anything but that! So of course she would have to give him another chance. An opportunity to prove that his harebrained antics of the night before had been a one-shot deal rather than the beginning of a new pattern. A single night of blowing off steam before he got down to a whole new year in the trenches.

Or at least to a part of a year to be spent there since if everything came off according to plan, the year ahead might begin right there where they were, but it was going to end in paradise. Sailing off into the sunset with... With that man? Was he really the one she had been waiting for? Was he really...?

Whatever the case may be, there was still a winter for them to get through before they could think about going anywhere. A winter during which Gabriela would have to do what she could to get her dream vessel ready for the big voyage as she awaited her turn at the dry-dock. Sometime in February, the manager of the little shipyard would tell her each time that she called. Sometime after all the fishing vessels on their way to the A Season in the Bering Sea had been taken care of, after all the routine haul-outs and the emergency repairs had been performed for any high priority customers who might need them, and after enough breaks in the weather had come along for them to increase their rate of production. As soon as all that was out of the way, she would be the very next in line, he told her again and again, so that February for sure. February for sure.

And so with the dry-docking still somewhere out ahead, somewhere out there in the indefinite future, they were very slow days for her, those grey January days which dragged on from one to the next like they might go on forever. Wet and cold and often windy as northwestern winters tend to be. Dark and dreary, and with rainy day following rainy day with such steady persistence that little productive work could be achieved on board the *Lady G*.

And little could be found by Gabriela to occupy her time as those boring, uneventful days rolled slowly by. Her life suddenly as dull and routine as those of her sisters back in South America, it seemed. So colorless all at once that no sooner had she finished with the big new burst of conversation which came in the wake of that New Year's Eve fiasco, talking the events over and over with every sister she had and analyzing them from every imaginable angle, than she found that she had little more left to discuss. Nothing but the slow-moving life aboard the *Lady G* and the occasional flare-up of fresh new doubts about the big man she had taken as her lover. None of which was so pressing as to merit anything more than the occasional, increasingly rare trip to the terminal—and to the telephone located there—as the days and weeks crept by. One after another after another.

Instead Gabriela spent nearly all her time at home, wandering about the *Lady G* and trying to get something accomplished each day, something that might help to bring the day of departure that much closer, while in the meantime she did her best to adjust mentally to the slow rhythms of that place during that time of year. To Rob and Renee who went about their work and their lives in the same unhurried manner that they always had, responding only in the most minimal way to her proddings for them to be more productive. And then there was the group of young men, their spirits perhaps even more somber, more dampened by the constant deluge out on deck than were her own. With nothing to brighten their days had it not been for the fun they had each time that Uncle José dared to show his face among them.

Had it not been for the way in which Justin, their leader, would immediately go after the old grouch whenever he appeared on the scene. Poking fun and provoking him, singing songs which he knew the guy would find offensive or making loud comments about gay people or other similar topics, and quickly driving the old man back to his room each time. Even going so

far on one day when everyone happened to be present in the main cabin as to grab onto Chris—the gay one whom Gabriela could now distinguish from the other at last—and give him a big kiss right there in front of everybody. In front of Gary who broke out into loud laughter at the sight, a bit too loud perhaps, a bit too self-conscious, while the others looked on with bemused expressions on their faces. And they only burst out laughing themselves when they saw José's reaction, his blow up, shouting insults in all directions as he beat a hasty retreat toward his room.

When it came to Gary, Justin seemed to have forgiven and forgotten by then, Justin and Chris as well. They both seemed to have accepted his apology. Though despite the outward reconciliation which had taken place among them, Gabriela could sense that much of the warmth had gone out of their relationship, much of the big brother/little brother understanding which had previously been there. Because while they would still smile and talk to each other on those weekend days when they happened to meet, none of the younger men was ever to be seen on weekday evenings in the way that they once had been. None of them hanging out to spend their free time with Gary.

And so without those young men's presence, without Rob and Renee who continued their long-time routine of eating early and then retiring to their room to do whatever it is that old couples do, those long, quiet evenings in the main cabin were left for Gabriela to spend with her man alone. With Gary who seemed to be on his best behavior as the year got underway, never allowing that other man to come back out. That dark and disagreeable man of New Year's Eve. Not even when he had too much to drink, as instead the alcohol would serve only to accentuate some strange new persona which he had already been in the process of becoming over the last month or so, it appeared to Gabriela as she thought back. Moody and unpredictable. A man who would sometimes be loving and considerate, hardly speaking of himself as he asked her about her own day instead, listened with attention when she spoke and did what little favors he could as well, perhaps even showing up from work with flowers or candy. But then there were other days when he would be quiet, even morose. Days on which he seemed to be carrying all the problems from work back home with him, never asking Gabriela about herself as instead the only things he wanted to discuss on those nights would be the challenges he faced down at the terminal. Droning on about Sorensen this and Bowman that, and all of it so deadly dull that when her uncle would step out of his room and crash their little two-person party, as he was starting to do with ever greater frequency, she would almost be glad to see him. Almost.

Her Uncle José who had figured out by then that evenings were the best time for him to venture into the outside world since Justin and his friends were sure to be gone, only his niece and his oversized friend to be seen. And while he would return to his room fairly quickly on those occasions when he found Gary to be in one of his happy or romantic moods, he would stick around and join in whenever he found that the other side of the big man was on display. He would jump into those conversations with such eagerness, such enthusiasm to air his own opinions and offer his advice on every issue at hand, that he would soon displace his niece. Much to her relief.

Because it was all so repetitious, those same old issues that refused to go away, refused to die. So boring that Gabriela practically wanted to scream each time she heard Gary getting started on them. Wanted to get up and run away on those nights when her uncle was slow to make his appearance, wanted to yell for the old man or go over and bang on his door or do

something else to get him out there so that she could tune the whole thing out in the way that she always did once the two men got going. Paying no heed as they blabbed away with their same old nonsense, with Gary's endless repetitions of the same old complaints and Uncle José's responses with the same advice every time. The same bad advice. This guy? Beat him up. That guy? Run him out of there.

And the old man would become especially heated whenever the subject of Sorensen and his strange brand of Christianity came up. He would denounce it as a false religion which had strayed even further from the one true church than had other types of Protestantism, warning the big man about the dangers it posed and making dire predictions about the future course of events while Gary would listen in silence, his face impassive so that it was impossible to tell whether he was buying what he heard or not. Whether he believed in that conspiracy theory which Uncle José had cooked up during one of their first sessions together, brought back up at every opportunity since. It was a theory according to which Sorensen's ultimate goal was to convert so many people in so many different departments as to finally arrive at some critical mass, with enough manpower on his side to where he could take over the entire terminal by simply ordering his people to stop listening to Gary and to obey him alone. To take their orders only from that "God" who supposedly spoke through him.

Uncle José seemed to believe that whole line of reasoning, whether the other man did or not. And then there was another subject that would always set him off each time it arose, the subject of government regulations. Stupid regulations as he was sure to characterize them, after which he would invariably add, "We never needed that stuff before. We just did what we wanted, and it all worked out." Saying it with the same deep conviction in his voice as when he spoke about Sorensen. This despite the fact that, as far as Gabriela knew, he had never in his life had anything to do with the operations of a marine terminal.

There came a night when that seemingly indelible pattern of male discussion and female boredom was to be broken, however, a night well into the second half of that slow-moving first month of the year. It was a night on which Gabriela was to intervene in the conversation in a way that she never had before, the subject at hand striking so close to home that she quickly leaped in to take over one side of the discussion despite her uncle's presence. Talking over the old man when he tried to speak and dismissing his nonsense out-of-hand. Shutting her ears to whatever he had to say while opening them wide to Gary. For once.

The issue that night had to do with the financial health of the terminal company, that company upon whose income, or at least whose resale value, she was depending in order to pay for her great adventure. So that any hint of problems in that area, any hint that the money which the *Lady G* seemed to suck up so ravenously might not be there in sufficient quantities...

According to what Gary had to say, Bowman had told him that day that the situation at the terminal wasn't a bit good right then. That despite their rising income thanks to the steady increase in trans-Pacific cargo volumes—with more goods being shipped into the country all the time, more American jobs being shipped out—their expenses had been rising even faster. Eating into the profit margin so relentlessly that it was only a matter of time before that margin would fall all the way to zero, past zero.

“So what can we do?” Gabriela asked in alarm as the gravity of the situation began to sink in.

“I don’t know. Bowman says that we gotta cut back. Gotta cut our costs...”

“Yes?”

“He says we gotta fire people is what. Says that *I* gotta fire people.” Gary’s voice choked a bit as he spoke that final phrase.

“O-o-oh.”

“Yeah, he says that we’re way over-staffed so we gotta get rid-a some-a the people we got workin’ there. Says that *I* gotta get rid of em.” There was that catch in the voice again. “Cause he says that’s the only way we can cut down on our costs.”

“So you...?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I can do it, cause it’s not...”

Yes? Go on, Gabriela said with her eyes.

“And like he won’t do a damn thing about it himself. He won’t even help me. Cause like when I look around that office-a his and I see some-a those people not doin’ much, like with all the computers and stuff they got now-days, ya know... But then when I say somethin’ about it, he’s like, ‘No way.’ He needs every single one of em, and he tells me that what I gotta do is I gotta go out lookin’ for people in other places that I can fire. Says I gotta...”

“Why don’t you fire *him*?” Uncle José had to get in his two cents worth.

“Nah, I can’t do that. I can’t... Gabi knows all about it.”

“But why not?”

“We just can’t, that’s all!” Gabriela had no intention of offering the old grump any more explanation than that. And she paid no attention to the offended look he gave her as she waited for Gary to go on.

“Ya know what he wants me to do instead? What he really wants me to do? He wants me to go after Sorensen is what. He wants... He says that security’s the worst department we got in that whole place, so he says that what I gotta do is I gotta go out and fire some-a the people there, some-a Sorensen’s men...”

“Fire all of them,” Uncle José blurted out.

Only for Gary to go on as though he hadn’t heard. “Well, what I told him was that if that’s what he wants, then he can go ahead and do it himself. He can go talk to Sorensen and tell him all about it.”

“And what did he say?” Gabriela tried to resume her role as chief interrogator.

“Nothin’. He didn’t say anything, he just kinda shut up about it after that.”

“You should fire both of them. Sorensen and Bowman both,” Uncle José went on despite the fact that no one was listening to him. “You should fire everybody and start all over.”

And then later as the talk turned to ways in which to cut their expenses aboard the *Lady G*, the old man was butting in and shooting off his mouth once again. Complaining about all the freeloaders and deadbeats they had living aboard—a category in which he didn’t include himself, evidently—and saying that what they needed to do was to clean house. To get rid of some of those young smart-alecks they had working there, and that they especially needed to dump that useless piece of baggage who went by the title of captain. Saying that they needed to replace that slow and stupid old man with someone else who could actually do the job. Someone such as himself, he seemed to imply, though he never came right out and said it in so many words.

As the days and weeks rolled by after that, none of the things they discussed that evening ever came to pass. Gary never fired anyone at the terminal, as far as Gabriela knew, not in the security department and not anywhere else, while at the same time Captain Rob maintained his position unmolested, he and Renee and the younger crewmembers as well. And the only cuts to expenses that anyone ever made were a few small, symbolic gestures aboard the *Lady G*, while as for the terminal, the financial problems continued on their course uninterrupted. Slowly simmering away and eating at the very foundations of Gabriela’s plans for the future. Quietly undermining those plans while she did her best not to notice, or at least not to let it get her down. To clutch at whatever bits of good news she could find in order to keep her hopes and dreams alive.

And she was glad that at least she’d had the foresight to have put some money aside already, to have told Bowman to set up a fund to pay for the dry-docking back on the day when she first called the shipyard, so that at least there would be no problem there. No problem if the day of that dry-docking ever arrived, that is, because when it came to scheduling in that little shipyard... The manager suddenly changing his tune one day without warning, telling her March for sure. “March? What happened to February?” Gabriela asked only to find herself being inundated with excuses. Heavy demand because of this fishing boat suffering weather damage, that boat needing a new propeller shaft, and slow production all along the way because of the rain that just wouldn’t let up that year. Though don’t worry about it, the man had gone on, because it would be March for sure.

March for sure? As Gabriela heard that phrase being uttered in such unapologetic tones, her faith in the man’s word took a big turn for the worse all at once. And so no sooner had she hung up the phone than she started to call every shipyard or boatyard she could find in nearby cities and towns. Some of them unable to accommodate a vessel the size of the *Lady G*, she was told, while in those that had big enough dry-docks, they also had waiting lists for her to contend with. Lists so long, her priority as a new and probably one-time customer so low, that the delay was going to be very long. Even longer than what it would be at that local shipyard. So that in other words, she had no choice but to wait and to listen as that manager told her March for sure, March for sure. Hope that it wouldn’t become April for sure. May.

As for Gary, the most noticeable change that took place in him as those winter days dragged on one after the other had to do with the way in which his restraint in the use of alcohol slowly but surely gave way. With his nightly consumption rising from one or two drinks at the beginning, up to several and even to many on a couple of occasions by the time the first month of the year had come to an end, the second one gotten underway. Stopping off at bars on the way home on his thirstiest evenings, arriving late and smelling of booze as he stomped and stumbled around, though at least when he did so, it was never in the guise of that “other” man Gabriela hoped never to see again. Because instead the man who showed up on that big schooner night after night, whether drunk or sober, would be the “new” man into whom he had been so steadily evolving over recent weeks. Months by then. The same man but more so on the drunken nights. Moodier and more complex. A man who could be so kind and affectionate on one evening, so ready and willing to make love, while on others he could be so dull and depressing, talking and complaining and whining.

And it was all so boring, so monotonous on those evenings when his mind was on the problems at work that there was one day when Gabriela actually went over and knocked on Uncle José’s door. Desperate to bring out that old man who seemed to feed off the big man’s bad moods in the same way that she fed off the good ones. Because the thought of having to sit there by herself and listen to him when he was acting like that. His problems always the same, exactly the same...

Or that is, they were always the same until that one time in early February when suddenly a new problem arose. When his pager went off at some godawful hour in the middle of the night with what may not have been the first call he had received since that December night when Sorensen tried to take over the front gate, though it was the first one in all that time that would prove to be anything other than routine. A call that roused him out of bed, still half-drunk from the night before, already half-hung-over for the coming day, and in an evil mood even before he left, cursing softly the whole time he was getting dressed. And he was still angry, not to mention sleep-deprived, when he made his return in the pre-dawn hours.

“What was it?” Gabriela asked softly from where she lay in bed, asked more from courtesy than interest.

“Ah, it was just some asshole... I mean some jerk in the hazmat department who was givin’ Chu a hard time.”

“Oh...?”

“Some guy named Landowski or somethin’ like that, runnin’ the night shift down there, and he goes and tells Chu that he’s not gonna take any more orders from him. Says he’s gonna run that department-a his the way he wants to, and he’s only gonna answer to God or some bullsh... some nonsense like that. Cause I guess the guy’s one-a them Sorensen types, wearin’ a cross on his shirt and the whole bit.”

“So is it serious? Is it a problem?”

“Nah, I went and, uh... I straightened the guy out.”

Or at least he thought at the time that he had straightened the guy out. Thought so until the next night when he received another call from Chu, made another emergency visit to the terminal where he was forced to straighten the guy out all over again.

Where according to what Gabriela was to hear later, Gary roughed the man up for the second night running. Took out some of his bad humor at being awakened at such an hour before forcing the guy off the grounds of the terminal. Though with the main gate being under the control of other Sorensen men, no sooner had Gary gotten into his truck and started for home than the man had been allowed back inside. Landowski who on the first night had at least shown enough common sense not to let his return become known by those who might object, but who chose instead on that second occasion to do the exact opposite. Chose to call up Chu the moment he arrived back at the hazmat office, so that before Gary had even reached his home, along came another pager call. A u-turn and another roughing-up, this one more serious than what the previous ones had been, with a first round in the office and a second round right at the gate as he dragged the guy out. Right in front of the guard on duty to whom Gary evidently said something to the effect of, "You're next if ya let this asshole back inside!"

Over the next couple of days there was a lull in the action, though as it turned out it had nothing to do with Landowski having learned his lesson. No, it was a lull that occurred simply because of the fact that there were no ships in port on those nights. No night shift in the planning office to be antagonized. Because no sooner had the third night arrived than Gary was the recipient of yet another call, this one from O'Hara who had taken over the night shift that week. Yet another late night trip to the terminal to teach Landowski yet another lesson.

"What the hell do I gotta do?" he asked as he got up and got dressed that night. "Whatta I gotta do?"

"I told you so," Uncle José practically shouted when he heard the news that evening. "I said this would happen."

And happen it did, again and again. With Gary being called out every night there was a ship in port, heading down to straighten the guy out one more time. Though now as he arrived at those late night hours, it was only to find that there was at least one lesson which Landowski had learned from their early encounters. He had learned that it was better to make himself scarce when he knew that the big man was on his way, better to avoid any more roughing-up sessions and to turn those new visits into long, drawn-out games of hide-and-seek instead. Games in which Gary would grow ever more frustrated at the hours of fruitless searching they entailed, while as for Landowski, he seemed to thrive on the whole thing. Seemed to enjoy it so much that there were a couple of nights with no ship in port that he even made the calls to the pager himself.

Rubbing it in for that big man who tried everything he could think of to put an end to the situation as those days and sleepless nights turned into a week and then a second with no solution in sight. Attempted ambushes and sneak attacks which came to nothing, while the visit Gary paid to Henderson, Landowski's supposed boss, proved just as fruitless. With Henderson telling him that the guy was completely out of control, that he would listen to no one but Sorensen, so that

even firing him would have had no practical effect since he would have ignored it and gone on in the same way.

Gone on making a fool of his big opponent for all to see, according to the stories Gabriela heard from her friends at the terminal. With Gary's impotence in face of such defiance, his inability to silence the man being so clearly demonstrated night after night that soon the people at the terminal were starting to whisper about him behind his back. Starting to say that he had finally met his match and that he was now a has-been whose old-school methods weren't up to this new type of challenge. And they said those things more loudly with each passing day as his anti-Landowski campaign dragged on and on with no end in sight, their voices rising from whispers to quiet comments to open insults, some of them uttered when they knew that the man was within earshot. Speaking so bluntly, so unabashedly, that soon even people who had long feared him or held him in awe were starting to join in. Even they were adding their voices to the chorus and saying whatever they pleased. As long as the big man's back was turned, that is. Not one of them brave enough to say those things to his face.

And so it wasn't until after word had spread far and wide, clear from the terminal to the town and all the way to a friend of Justin's, that ever a person appeared who wasn't afraid to confront Gary head-on. Justin who had no fear and no compunction about saying exactly what he had on his mind as he came walking into the main cabin one evening late in the second week of the big man's travails. Walking in with a grim expression on his face, accompanied by Chris and Mike and a newly arrived crewmember also named Mike, and then coming to a halt before the table at which Gary sat. Fixing the big man with a tough, determined stare as his friends formed into a line just behind him, until finally he spoke up in a low, hard voice once everyone was in position. "What's this I hear ya been doin' to Nick?"

"Nick...?"

"Yeah, Nick. Tim's brother. Cause I been hearin' some bad shit."

"Nick...? Oh, ya mean Landowski? That asshole who's been..."

"No, he's not the asshole. You're the asshole! That's what I been hearin'."

"Me!?" Gary sounded stunned by the impact of those words, burned by the fire in the younger man's voice. "Me...?"

Yes you! Gabriela was about to add until she noticed the look of wide-eyed incredulity on the man's face. Shocked and dazed and defenseless all at once.

"Me...?" Gary whimpered more than spoke as the young men stared at him in silence. "I didn't do anything..."

"Bullshit!" Justin's only reply.

"But he's the one who started it. I didn't..." Gary glanced from one to the other of his accusers as he spoke. A how-can-I-be-the-bad-guy? in his tone, on his face. "I didn't do anything wrong..." he began to grovel.

“Ya gotta stop this shit! Ya gotta leave him alone.” Justin was adamant. Answering the man’s ongoing whines and his pathetic pleas of innocence with cold stares or curt dismissals. Repeating his order to leave Nick alone and repeating it again, until suddenly he cut off all further discussion. A contemptuous scowl and a wave of his arm for his friends to follow as he went stomping out, his mind spoken so that there was nothing left for him to say. Nothing to do but to walk out on that former friend of his, that former hero, former big brother, now mired in disgrace.

“What’d I do?” Gary went on with his whining as he and Gabriela were left alone in the main cabin. “What’d I do wrong?”

Gabriela didn’t know what to say, didn’t know if she should get up and walk out as well. Though even without her piling on and taking Justin’s side, still the big man seemed to realize at that moment that he was licked at last. That the time had come for him to give up the fight. And so when his pager went off that night as it did every night, he ignored it for once and went back to sleep. Told everyone at work the next day not to call him about Landowski anymore, told them to deal with that troublemaker in any way that they could, but whatever happened to leave him out of it. Because he was finished with that whole affair. Over, done, kaput.

And instead it seemed that the only thing he wanted to do on his first post-Landowski day was to get as drunk as he possibly could. To leave work early and head for a bar where he sat around drinking until late at night. Pouring so much alcohol down his throat that it’s hard to say how he ever made it back to the marina in one piece, being far too drunk to drive. Too drunk even to walk as he fell off the dock along the way and had to fight his way back out of the water before he could finally come staggering into Gabriela’s cabin aboard the *Lady G*. Water dripping from his heavy winter coat, sloshing from his steel-toed boots.

And then as though the events of that day and night hadn’t been bad enough, he went out and repeated the entire performance on the next day and the day after that, leaving out only the part about the fall from the dock. He got stinking drunk again and then again while Gabriela practically pulled her hair with worry. Asked herself what was wrong. Asked what she could do to help.

“What is it?” she asked the big man aloud on the morning of the third day. “What’s wrong? You can tell me.”

Only to be told, “Nothin’,” in a tired, hung-over voice.

And it wasn’t until that evening that ever the man had another word to say on the subject. Stumbling into her cabin late at night and then letting loose in a drunken tirade, a rant so slurred and so rambling as to be nearly unintelligible. “You did this to me,” he blurted out in an angry roar as she lay in bed staring back at him. “You and this job. This good goddamned job. Cause I was never like this before. I never did shit like this, and I was never an asshole like... like... Cause I was a good guy, that’s what I was. I was cool. I was... I was nothin’ like this. Not till now with this job ya went and gave me and all this bullshit I gotta deal with all the time and all this... Cause it’s you that did this to me. It’s all you.”

Gabriela could hardly believe what she was hearing. So much nonsense pouring from the man's mouth, so many false accusations. Because the very idea of saying that it was her fault that he was having trouble at work. Her fault that he had made such a fool of himself with Landowski and that now he was drinking himself into a state of complete imbecility. It was just... It was ridiculous!

And she would have told him so, too, would have put that man back in his place had he not been so blind drunk right then, any words of hers doomed to bounce off that pickled brain of his without effect. She would have shouted and argued and called him a liar and a fool and any other word that came into her head. Would have said a whole lot more than what she finally did. "You're drunk!" stated with an air of finality as she rolled over in bed. Turned her back and tried to ignore him from there on out, tried to get some sleep while biding her time and waiting for morning when the guy would be sober, more-or-less. When she would be able to tear into him in the way that he deserved to be torn into. Mercilessly and at full volume, with such force that he would never dare to speak to her in that way again. Never dare to look her in the face unless she gave her permission first. Never dare to...

"Sorry," the big man said the moment she opened her eyes in the morning, disarming her assault before it could begin. Sorry for all the things he said the night before, all those stupid things, he repeated the phrase again and again. And he took back every one of them, he assured her in a heartfelt tone. He took back the ones he could remember, and he took back the ones he couldn't. He disavowed them all, and he swore that he would never let anything like that happen again. Never, ever.

And in fact he would never take another drink, he declared as he got out of bed to scrounge up some morning coffee for her. Because he was finished with all that. Forever! Clean and sober from that day forward. That first day of the rest of his straight-arrow life.

That Saturday on which there was no need for him to go to the terminal. Nothing to prevent him from spending the entire day with her, perhaps even taking her out for a day on the town, as he soon proposed to do. A stroll in the rain and a bit of window shopping and a meal at a nice restaurant, a movie followed by a visit to every bookstore they could find since Gary wanted to stock up on books for the rest of the winter. Novels and books on history and Eastern religions. And then there was one thin little volume that he got particularly excited about from the first moment he saw it, a book by some man Gabriela had never heard of before. Johnson or something like that.

As the two of them returned to the *Lady G* at the end of the day, things were suddenly starting to look a whole lot brighter to Gabriela than they had in a long, long time. Bright and happy despite the gloomy skies. With Gary as kind and considerate as she had ever seen him, as romantic as she could have wished. His words those of a lover, intimate and affectionate even when he joked or chaffed her gently. And it was all so genuine, those smiles, those amorous glances, that her uncle quickly fled back to his room the moment he came out and caught sight of the expression on the big man's face. With such joy radiating from it, so much of that positive energy which always seemed to repel the old man, that despite the fact that he hadn't seen his one and only friend in days, not since before the man's recent string of drunken debaucheries and

late night arrivals, still José couldn't bear to be with the guy when he was like that. Still he preferred the solitude of his own room to the company of that happy, smiling man.

That man whose thoughtful words soon gave way to soft kisses and well-aimed caresses as he and his lover made their way into the owner's cabin together. As they stretched out on that bed in which Gabriela's night rapidly dissolved into a haze of pure pleasure, of a slow, smoldering seduction that had her begging for more and more and more. Had her clutching at the man and kissing him wherever she could reach as he ran his hands, his mouth over every pulsing, pleading erogenous zone she had. Driving her to heights of ecstasy such as she had never known before, only glimpsed, only imagined. Heights which left her chanting to herself as she lay in his arms at the end, I love you, I love you, Oh how I love you.

"I love you," the words escaped her lips before she could stop them. The first time she had said such a thing aloud, she realized the moment she heard herself speak. The first time she had lowered her façade of toughness while in the big man's presence and left herself vulnerable, her feelings exposed. So that had Gary taken advantage of the opening, had he said or done anything more than the, "I love ya too," and the kiss, the hug, the hand stroking her hair...

With the next day being Sunday, the two of them had another full day together. A day that turned out to be even more beautiful than what the previous one had been, if such a thing is possible. They hung out aboard the *Lady G* where they had little to do but to exchange loving glances whenever the opportunity presented itself. With Gary performing the occasional odd job aboard the big schooner, though he spent far more time thumbing through his newly acquired books. Reading a chapter here, an introduction there, but not settling down with any one of them in particular. And he would pick up the little book by that Johnson person from time to time, look at the covers with a strange expression on his face. Curiosity leavened with an exaggerated sense of respect, perhaps. Anticipation leavened with a fear of disappointment. Finally set the book back down each time so that it remained unopened throughout the day.

And that book was still unopened when he returned from work on Monday evening at the normal hour, clean and sober just as he had promised. Though while he may have had a smile on his face as he arrived home, it somehow lacked the brilliance of the last two days, seeming forced and unconvincing in some hard-to-define way. And it even grew visibly distracted a few times as she caught him staring at her glass of wine with a look of longing in his eyes. The look of a man in search of... of something. As though his return to the terminal that day had started to dredge up bad thoughts, bad memories. Started to darken his mood and perhaps even to weaken his will.

And so it came as something of a relief to Gabriela when at midweek Gary finally opened the Johnson book and began to read. Began to get his mind onto something other than the problems at the terminal, as became clear from the way in which he grew so deeply absorbed in that book over the next few days. Everything else seeming to fade from his mind as he read pages and reread them and marked out passages for further study. And then when he would set the book down from time to time and attempt to discuss what he had just been reading, he would have a calm, almost beatific smile on his face as he spoke. Talking and talking while Gabriela smiled back. While she pretended to pay attention, pretended to care about what he had to say.

All those words that meant so much to him, so little to her. All that talk-talk-talk about the theories and ideas of some man of whom she knew absolutely nothing. Cared even less.

ADVICE TO THE WISE: SKIP THIS CHAPTER

As the reader may have noticed by now, the male character in this book has a long-standing interest in the works of Albert Johnson. One which is clearly not shared by the female character. Though as coincidence would have it, I myself happen to be a long-time fan of that now nearly forgotten writer and thinker. And so with such a golden opportunity to delve more deeply into the man's ideas having presented itself all at once, I feel that I can hardly let it go by without further comment. As I began to consider ways in which to explain some of the highlights of his work, however, I shuddered at the prospect of subjecting the reader to a blow-by-blow account of the steady stream of readings from and commentaries upon the text which the female character is being forced to suffer through at this point in the story. That would constitute a martyrdom such as no reader should ever have to endure. And it was for that reason that I decided in the end to append this chapter in which I offer a brief summary of the man's work.

It is a chapter devoted to a series of ideas which certain readers may find to be of some small interest, while for others it will prove to be a deadly bore. So dull and dry that I have but one piece of advice to offer those of you who may fall into that second category: skip this chapter. Doing so will in no way affect your understanding of events.

The Johnson book which the character has just discovered would prove to be the man's final work, written more than a decade after his penultimate work. And it was a book that was to pass virtually unnoticed, coming out as it did in the final decade of the previous millennium. At a time when the "dot-com boom" was at its height—before it became the dot-com bubble. Interest in alternatives to a then-triumphant economic system at such a low ebb that the book remains unknown to this day even to the vast majority of those who had read his earlier works. Even to some who at one time might have called themselves Johnsonians.

The book in question followed many of the patterns of Mr. Johnson's earlier works, though there were others which it was to break rather ruthlessly. It followed the author's usual practice of making no mention of politics or any of the so-called issues of the day, focusing instead upon what he took to be the very heart of the matter: the economic system, the foundation upon which all the rest of society is built. Unlike in his previous works, however, those books which had consisted of three more-or-less equal sections, with the first offering a critique of socialism while the second dealt with capitalism and the third presented his vision of an alternative, this final book omitted the section on socialism altogether. The collapse of the Soviet Union of a few years before having killed off that system as a topic of interest in the author's eyes, evidently. Left it too deeply buried in the trashcan of history to rate any further mention. Not even a goodbye, an I-told-you-so from that man who had long predicted its demise. And so in place of what had always been his first topic of discussion, Mr. Johnson dove directly into his critique of capitalism instead. His last-best attempt to refine his theories.

He began that process with yet another restatement of his oft-repeated premise that the greatest misstep economists ever took in their various analyses of capitalism came at the very beginning of their work, at what was virtually their first step, in fact. It came when they chose to analyze and build models of that thing which is generally referred to as the economy as a whole. An economic world in which savings always equal investment, so that most of the problems which to Mr. Johnson's mind constitute the central keys to an economy's performance were simply defined away. They ceased to exist in those economists' work in the same way that problems having to do with energy efficiency would cease to exist if physicists were to study motors or other mechanical systems by modeling the universe as a whole. By looking at a world in which energy can never be lost, so that things like friction and waste heat would have no meaning for them, every motor they measured proving to be one hundred percent efficient.

And so it was in an effort to avoid falling into that same trap himself that Mr. Johnson chose to restrict his analysis to what he called the productive sector of the economy. Paying no attention to any other sectors except as they come into contact with the productive sector, as they interact with and have some impact upon what for him is the "true economy." And as those of you who are familiar with his work may already know, it was in the process of studying those interactions that Mr. Johnson came up with what was to become his most famous concept, that of Flow Factors. His explanation and analysis of the ways in which money flows into and out of the productive sector of the economy.

Through the outflows to other countries which come from the purchase of imported goods, and the inflows which come from the sale of exports. The outflows to the government through the payment of taxes and fees, and the inflows which are created by government spending. By the money spent on consumer goods and services by all those who receive income from the government—public employees and members of the military and recipients of social security or unemployment or welfare—and also by direct government consumption of everything from building materials to office equipment to military hardware.

And then in those flow factors which Mr. Johnson considered to be the most crucial of all, there are the outflows which occur when savings taken from the productive sector are used for unproductive investment, the inflows which occur when income from the unproductive sector is used for consumption or productive investment. Because in his mind, it is the balance or imbalance between those two types of flows that holds the key to the economy's performance at any given moment, while as for the aggregate or overall investment to which other economists have paid so much heed, it actually has little to do with the functioning of the economy. Held in esteem only by those who accept the unspoken and highly questionable assumption that all investment is created equal. That there is no difference between savings which are used to start a new company or to expand or maintain an older one, and those which go toward the purchase of a stock or a piece of property or some other already-existing asset. No difference between investment which earns its returns by contributing to the production and selling of goods and services on the consumer market, and that which depends solely upon market fluctuations. Making profits through changes in the "market value" of its assets rather than by creating real-world value.

And while Mr. Johnson may have discussed the importance of making a distinction between those two types of investment in his earlier works, his final book contained a warning

that was louder and grimmer than anything which had come before. A warning about the disastrous consequences that await us if we continue on in our same old myopic way, ignoring the fact that the explosive growth of unproductive investment which had taken place over the last few decades had created a problem whose dimensions and whose gravity were growing at an exponential rate. A problem which by then had been converted from the minor irritant which it had long been into a looming disaster, an insatiable monster intent on eating up whatever was left of the productive economy.

Because already as he wrote his book, what he called the unproductive economy had grown to such huge proportions as to have become an end in itself. With the ever bigger profits to be made by simply buying and selling old assets—by engaging in a sort of income redistribution among the wealthy—drawing ever more capital away from the productive sector as instead the owners of that capital found it more profitable to chase after the next big thing or the next bubble in what could be called a gigantic Ponzi scheme were it not for the fact that in this case there is no one at the controls. With the value of any class of assets going up for no other reason than the fact that investors have started to move in, and with the rising values attracting more and more investors all the time, both the dumb ones who hold on until the bubble bursts and the smart ones who get out while the getting is good.

Meanwhile as all this is going on, the productive economy appears to be suffering from a chronic shortage of capital. A shortage which is in fact a complete illusion, as Mr. Johnson insists, since for him the real problem is not that there is a shortage but rather that there is a super-abundance of capital. That there are such huge stocks of capital floating around in the unproductive economy, constantly drawing in or “creating” still more capital as it feeds upon itself, that the productive economy will never be able to compete again except during those brief periods of time when all the stars are aligned. When major new technologies and industries are in their explosive growth phase. While at any other time the unproductive economy, with its increasingly original and innovative ways to create phantom wealth—from futures to derivatives to derivatives of derivatives—has come to constitute an absolute wealth sink. An economic black hole into which capital enters never to be seen again by the productive economy.

And then as though things weren’t bad enough already, we also have to contend with the fact that economists are completely unprepared to deal with a problem of that sort. Unprepared even to diagnose it since it falls so far outside the classical economics they were taught in school as to be unthinkable to most of them. Inconceivable. While even those few who have managed to identify some of the major symptoms have failed to grasp the true nature of the disease.

And so with our economists’ vision as narrow as it is, as incapable of providing so much as an accurate diagnosis of the ailments from which we suffer, let alone knowing how to deal with them in any effective way, the remedies they prescribe can never be more than gropings in the dark. Each economist seeing just enough of what is going on as to confirm his or her own preconceived notions and thereby to reinforce his or her ignorance. To learn nothing from experience while continuing to push the same old solutions.

More growth, their unanimous prescription. Not a word about any of the structural changes needed to adapt to a future of slower growth—the inevitable future of a mature economy such as ours—as they prefer instead to kick the can a little further down the road. To squeeze out

a few more years of high growth at whatever long-term cost. And while the various schools of thought may diverge when it comes to the question of how exactly to bring about that growth, there is little difference in the real-world results their policies produce. Whether it be those of the liberals who push for Keynesian stimulus, an increase in government spending each time the “economy as a whole” starts to slow down, or those of the conservatives who prefer the backdoor Keynesianism of tax cuts. Because whatever the theoretical underpinnings of either approach may be, in actual practice they both serve mainly to stimulate the economy through an increase in what Mr. Johnson referred to as net government inflows. With the lower taxes advocated by the one side reducing the outflows to the government, or with the higher spending advocated by the other increasing the inflows, and with the same final result in either case: bigger government deficits. Bigger net inflows with which to offset the outflow of savings into the unproductive economy.

It is a form of stimulus that was carried to great extremes during what Mr. Johnson called the “debt-boom” of the eighties, a period of false prosperity since the productive sector of the economy had continued to struggle, with many key industries suffering depression-like conditions despite all the red ink and the “growth” it created in other areas. And while the deficits may have gone back down dramatically in the glory years of the “dot-com boom,” the time during which he was writing his book, he warned that the relief was bound to be temporary. That deficits would come roaring back once the boom became a bust, as all booms eventually do, since more deficits were the only solution that economists would have to offer for the downturn.

Deficits which by then had been so large and so sustained over a period of so many years that they might already have become a chronic condition, he went on to warn. A standard part of the nation’s economy and one to which we were building up a tolerance just as surely as a junkie builds tolerance to his drug. With each new and stronger dose of the deficit-drug leading not to big new spurts of growth but rather to big new floods of imports, as badly decayed as our manufacturing sector had become after decades of neglect and “free market” policies. Our trade deficit going up so rapidly during periods of increased deficit-stimulus as to stimulate growth in foreign countries far more effectively than it does at home.

And then even with that portion of government inflows which remains within national borders, the stimulating effect upon the economy—the real economy, the productive economy—may be far less than what the raw numbers on deficits would suggest. Both fiscal deficits and monetary “pump-priming” which has the same effect though more so. Because whatever the state of technology and innovation may be at the time of any given stimulus, whatever the potential for growth in the productive sector, not all the capital being created will actually be used for productive investment. Some of it, perhaps most of it, will go either directly or indirectly into the unproductive economy where it will have little or no stimulating effect. Where in fact its impact upon the productive economy may even prove to be negative since a sudden surge of money into unproductive investment might tend to draw even more money behind it. Away from those areas in which it would do some good.

And so with our resistance to the deficit-drug growing greater by the day, with the government’s ability to stimulate its way out of any future economic crises becoming ever more questionable, Mr. Johnson warned that we face a long period of diminishing returns. An ever more precarious situation which could continue to grow worse forever, with the nation being

forced to respond to each new crisis with even bigger deficits. Huge deficits, gigantic deficits which could someday reach such magnitudes as to call into question the very faith and credit of the national government. That government which has always served as the lender of last resort in times of crisis. Its word, its promises the only thing standing between us and the economic abyss.

Though will some “final crisis” of that sort ever occur? Mr. Johnson made no predictions along those lines, saying that he was an economist not a fortune teller, and instead he ended his analysis of capitalism at that point, with that open-ended warning hanging in the air. Moved on instead to what had always been the third section of his books, the second section in this case. The one in which he discussed alternatives to the two standard systems. Though just as that final work of his contained no “first” section, so the section on alternatives proved to be far different from anything which had come before. So reduced in length as to be nearly nonexistent. Much to the disappointment of his fans and followers.

Mr. Johnson made no mention of any of those things which he had previously considered to be of such great importance. He made no attempt to advocate and explain some radical restructuring of the economy into a system that would avoid the pitfalls of both socialism and capitalism. And in fact he went so far as to omit any talk about what he had always claimed to be the starting point for any true reform, the most basic, fundamental change which had to be carried out in a society that hoped to create a non-capitalist free enterprise system. He said nothing about rethinking and rewriting the laws regarding property. Recognizing the fact that there is nothing organic or God-given about any of those laws as they exist today, being instead the direct descendants of the old-time “right of conquest.” Remnants of an age in which land belonged not to those who lived and worked on it, but rather to whichever member of the warrior class managed to conquer it. Because while the method of acquiring land and other forms of property may have evolved over subsequent centuries into one in which money rather than conquest came to play the central role, everything else about the old system has remained virtually unchanged. The rights and privileges of absentee ownership sustained and even expanded due to the fact that property laws are written and enforced by those who own the most property and therefore those who have the most to lose in any reform. Those who out of pure self-interest have always been mainly concerned with holding onto what they have and keeping it out of the hands of others. Especially out of the hands of those who have nothing.

No, Mr. Johnson said nothing about property or property laws or any of the rest, but instead his book launched straight into a critique of some of the most popular “reform” ideas that were floating around at the time he wrote. Monetarism? He dismissed it as nothing more than Keynesianism with one hand tied behind its back. And the so-called libertarian alternatives which were fast gaining adherents in those days? He saw little hope for their ideas to produce anything other than disaster, lacking any vision of deep structural changes as they did—any changes to property laws, evidently, though he never said it in so many words. Because without that sort of change to basic structures, any brand new free enterprise system which we might try to create would inevitably degenerate back into capitalism sooner or later. Perhaps even into a worse and more oppressive form of capitalism than the one under which we currently suffer, Mr. Johnson warned as he went on to criticize the fantasy-world nature of so many of the movement’s founding ideas. Advocated by people who, as far as he could tell, had learned nothing from the lessons of history, their entire world view built instead upon some dubious belief in an illusory Golden Age in America’s past. Back in the good old laissez-faire days of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before the government stepped in and ruined it all. Though as Mr. Johnson tried to splash a bit of the cold water of reality upon that rosy picture of theirs, he pointed out the fact that rather than being the small-owner paradise that “libertarians” seem to imagine, the laissez-faire days had actually been the time of the Robber Barons. Ruthless greed and corruption and unchecked monopolies. A time of huge ups and downs as well, of booms and busts, with a major depression coming along every generation or so. And if at the time he was writing depressions had come to be such a thing of the past that young and even middle aged people had never actually experienced one firsthand, that was largely due to the policies which had been put into place during and after the last big one. So that as Mr. Johnson looked at the proposals being put forward by those so-called free marketers, their one and only solution for our current economic woes a wholesale scrapping of the very system of controls and protections which had led to all those decades of unprecedented stability and prosperity, he could only compare their logic to that of Ortega y Gasset’s famous bread rioters: they were angry because there wasn’t enough bread, so they went out and burned down the bakeries.

As he arrived at the end of the subject at last, the end of his book and the time to draw what final conclusions he might, Mr. Johnson’s words suddenly turned pessimistic in a way that they never had before. As though all hope for a better future had gone out of the old man by that time. He said that as it appeared to him then, anything that could possibly be accomplished under present circumstances would be ineffective in dealing with the true problems which the nation faced, while anything that might be effective would be impossible to implement. Struck down or watered down by those who benefited most from the current system, so that short of a total collapse and a rebuilding from the ground up, there was little to be accomplished. Not when the forces of ignorance were as firmly in control as they were at the time, his words took on a strangely mystical tone all at once. With no hope for knowledge and enlightenment, and nothing to do but to ride along. Ride that thing to the bottom.

WHO? WHAT?

When Gary finished his book at last, one evening as he and Gabriela sat together in the main cabin of the *Lady G*, the only commentary he had to offer was a look of perplexity upon his face as he glanced up at her. An instant later his eyes were back on the book, rereading the last page and reading it again, flipping back a few pages as though to get a running start before he read it yet again. And finally he closed the book altogether to stare disconsolately at the covers, front and back, while muttered phrases escaped his lips. “I don’t get it.” “I can’t believe it.” “There’s gotta be more.”

He made no attempt at lovemaking that night as the two of them got into bed, no soft embraces and no loving talk and barely a kiss goodnight. Nothing like what the previous Sunday evening had been, or even like the night before when his daylong break from the terminal seemed to have gotten his romantic juices flowing once again. Because now there was nothing, no interest whatsoever.

And then as though his mood hadn’t been bad enough in the evening, Gary refused to get out of bed on Monday morning. “Leave me alone,” his only reply when Gabriela told him that it

was time to get up. “I don’t want to,” when she reminded him that he had to go to work that day. And he even bellowed, “Shut up!” at Renee when she knocked on the door and told him in her mild way, “Time to get goin’, Mr. Gary.” He fought instead to keep his eyes closed and get back to sleep, and to avoid the reality which awaited him. He turned to one side and then the other, wrapped the pillow around his exposed ear and lay immobile, until suddenly he gave up. Sat up and said, “Fuck it!!” Got out of bed and left for work.

And his mood was as dark as Gabriela had seen it in a long time when he came home that evening. His disappointment at the author’s final conclusions eating away at him somewhere down inside, it appeared, though she couldn’t say for sure since he never discussed that last day’s reading with her. Because for all she knew, he could simply have been disappointed at the fact that now he had nothing left to read, his mental vacation at an end as he made his unwilling return to that place we call the “real world.” To the many problems at the terminal which he hadn’t said a word about over the previous week, but which seemed to have come crashing down upon him all at once in that first post-book day of work. And all he could do as he sat in the main cabin that evening was to moan and groan in a way that would have drawn Uncle José in an instant had the old man not given up on his big friend after a full week of uninterrupted good humor. The gloomy side having made its return with a vengeance now as Gary droned on and on about office politics and the fast deteriorating financial situation and Sorensen’s newly emboldened attitude in the wake of the Landowski fiasco, on top of which there were two subjects he spoke about that night which fell somewhere outside his usual range of complaints. An old problem which Gabriela hadn’t heard him mention in quite some time, apparently having taken a turn for the worse in recent days, along with a brand spanking new one.

The old problem was one that Gabriela—and now Gary—had inherited from the bad old anarchic days following Roy’s death, a problem having to do with the repair gangs who came in to perform whatever work the vessels might request. Because while Roy had always contracted with a single company to do all the repairs, that had changed during the years when there was no one in charge, decisions being made in strange and shadowy ways. And in fact the whole thing had spun so far out of control by the time Gabriela made her return that she had found a whole group of companies to be holding contracts to perform repairs of one sort or another. Contracts which overlapped in any number of areas. And so given all the confusion about who was to be called in for which specific jobs, the situation around the terminal had descended over time into an endless territorial dispute among the various companies. With shouting matches and fist fights and even acts of sabotage and destruction of their competitors’ equipment.

And while Gary had tried to deal with the problem some time back after a particularly serious outbreak of hostilities, the solution he came up with seemed to have pleased no one. His answer having been to tell the shipping companies using the terminal that from there on out, they would be able to call only one company at a time. So that if one of their ships wanted repairs done on the cargo spaces out on deck, they couldn’t have engine work performed by a different company at the same time, but instead they would have to choose between the two. One company or the other. His answer the creation of a new and supposedly improved system, though a system which in practice, while it may have succeeded in putting an end to the physical conflicts between repair gangs, had at the same time served to unify those gangs in an unintended and most unfortunate way. It had unified them in their hatred of the man they now

came to see as their common enemy: Gary. That man whose new policy had cut into the amount of work available to each and every one of them.

As Gary told Gabriela about just how heated the situation had become of late, he described some of the recent comments he had overheard from repair gang members. Insults and threats which seemed to be growing more serious all the time. This guy saying this, and that guy saying the other. When suddenly just as his whining appeared to be running out of steam, he segued into a whole new area, a new problem which she had never heard him speak of before. It was a problem which had only arisen during the last week, evidently. At a time when his attention had been so firmly focused upon other things that it had made little impression upon him. Not until now, after a full day spent at the terminal with nothing to occupy his mind but so-called reality. Now as the significance of what he heard that other day seemed to have hit him all at once. Like a ton of bricks.

“We got this, like... this thing goin’ on down there,” he began slowly, as though still trying to screw up the courage to discuss the matter. “Cause it’s like this... this... Ya know that association we belong to down there, that... You know, that management association.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well they sent us this message the other day tellin’ us that, like... Sayin’ that the contract we got with the longshore union’s gonna be runnin’ out pretty soon, so they want us to all get together or somethin’...”

“Oh?”

“They want us to plan out a strategy for dealin’ with em, is what. A strategy for... for... for union bustin’!”

That last phrase came out with such passion that Gabriela was struck silent, unsure how to respond.

“Cause bustin’ unions? When I been a union man my whole life. When I always been on the side-a the unions. So that now when they tell me that I gotta...”

Yes? she asked wordlessly.

“I mean, I feel like a scab just talkin’ about it. I feel like I’m a traitor or somethin’, and I gotta like... I mean what side am I supposed to be on?”

“What side? You’re on my side, of course. You have to be on my side.” The question stirred Gabriela to speech.

“Your side?” The big man seemed taken aback at her quiet earnestness. “Yeah, a course I’m on your side. I’m always gonna be on your side. But it’s just...” His voice faded into reflection at that point, a low murmur with only the occasional brief revival of normal speech. “We’re talkin’ about unions here, ya know. Unions!” And he was still muttering to himself from time to time as he climbed into bed that night, lay down without a word of goodnight, without a

gesture to the woman beside him. Like she wasn't even there. Gabriela who soon gave up on the man and rolled away. Closed her eyes and tried to sleep, thankful that at least he was sober that night.

At least he hadn't gone back to drinking, but instead he was maintaining his pledge of sobriety as that shortest month of the year came to a close. That February which seemed to have been dragging on for years by then. At an end at last, so that she had only a few more weeks to get through before the time of the equinox. The official beginning of the spring for which she had been waiting throughout so many dreary winter days and months. The spring during which her dreams would finally come true, if only she could hold out for a little while longer. If only that man of hers...

If only he hadn't done what he did the very next day.

Late in making his return from the terminal while Gabriela grew more anxious with each passing minute, each passing hour as the supper Renee had left for him went cold and stale. And though Gabriela tried to put a brave face on things at first, making up excuses to explain his tardiness, she knew in her heart what the real problem was. Knew that she faced another of those late night drunken arrivals: staggering footsteps and the stink of booze on the man's breath and perhaps even with his clothes dripping wet from another swim. All those things she had been hoping never to see again. And so she began to prepare herself for a night of that sort as the hours ticked slowly by. Prepare herself for that or for something even worse. For a message from the police or a hospital—or the morgue.

And Gabriela practically jumped out of her skin when she heard a voice call her name late that evening, the voice of a messenger as it turned out to be. A man she barely knew, sent by O'Hara with the key to the marina gate which they kept at the terminal so that he hadn't begun to call out until he was standing on the dock right next to the *Lady G*.

"What is it? What happened?" She was breathless with excitement as she shot up the ladder onto the deck.

"There's trouble down at work," the man said, that... whatever his name was. "O'Hara says for ya to come."

"Trouble!? What trouble? Is somebody hurt?" Meaning her man of course.

"Not hurt exactly..."

As Gabriela grabbed her things and joined the man in the cab of the planning department pickup truck, she peppered him with questions, sometimes waiting long enough for him to answer before launching into the next one and sometimes not. Though given her companion's apparent reluctance to divulge what he knew, she was able to gather little more than the broadest outlines of that day's and evening's events. Gary's departure from the terminal many hours earlier and his return a short time before. A return whose motive was unclear since no sooner had he gotten there than he had smashed up the truck he was driving. And then when it came to the events following the accident, that was when her companion grew especially tight-lipped. Telling her that the big man was unhurt but nothing more. No hint of what else might have transpired.

And so it wasn't until she arrived at the scene that Gabriela ever began to see just how much the man had left out. Not until the two of them made their approach to that rather isolated spot within the terminal, having driven in through the front gate by the planning office at the head of the pier where a ship was being worked at the time, turned in the direction of the main office and then followed the little road around a couple of corners that skirted rows of parked trailers until at last they came upon a group of people gathered near the crumpled remains of Gary's pickup truck. The big man evidently having failed to negotiate one of the rain-slick curves and smashed head-on into a trailer.

Because it was only then, only as they drew near enough for her to take in the details of the sordid scene unfolding beneath the streetlights in the drizzling rain, that Gabriela came to realize just how extensive—and how horrid—the untold portions of the story must be. With a whole group of people gathered in a circle around Gary who stumbled and staggered about in the center, so drunk that he could barely stay on his feet. They were nearly all men who formed that circle, members of some repair gang or other, as Gabriela was to learn later. And while they may have initially come to that spot to see if anyone needed help following the crash, those altruistic motives seemed to have long since vanished from their minds. Because rather than doing anything to help, what they were doing at that moment was to stand around taunting the big man and calling him names while he swore back at them and lunged this way and that. Too drunk to take more than a step or two before losing his balance as his tormentors would quickly shuffle back out of reach. A few of the braver ones going so far as to creep up behind him, hit or kick him and then jump back out of the way before he could get hold of them.

And it was all so ugly that Gabriela had to blink her eyes, unable to believe what she saw as the truck she was riding in came to a halt a short distance away. All those men and even a couple of women behaving with such open cruelty, such casual inhumanity. Both the active participants and the spectators who stood back and watched with coldhearted indifference, doing nothing to help. Not the little group of longshoremen off to one side and not Sorensen who stood on the other side with a few of his men. Sorensen who was supposed to be the head of security at the terminal, but who made no attempt to do his job. Laughing instead as he watched the indignities being heaped upon his nemesis.

"Stop that!" Gabriela yelled at the top of her lungs as she jumped out of the truck and leaped into angry action. "Stop that! Leave him alone!" Her blood boiling as she went charging into the center of the circle and put her arms around her man. "What are you doing!? Animals!!" she screamed as she turned to scan the faces of those who surrounded her. "You act like animals! Children!! And you should all be spanked. You should all be fired!!"

Not a voice was raised against her as she turned to look further around the circle, not a shout of defiance or a complaint as she saw the smiles start to fade from those faces. Serious, even sheepish looks appearing instead as heads began to bow in shame.

"Get out of here! All of you. Get out of this dock!!" she yelled again as she tugged on Gary's arm.

"I'm okay. I can handle it," he slurred out. "I don't need no help." Though despite his protestations, soon he was giving in and doing as he had been told. Following along unsteadily

while Gabriela led the way toward the waiting pickup, and while the circle gave way without resistance as the two of them approached.

“You’re a disgrace!” she screamed out a parting shot as she and her man got into the truck. “You’re all a disgrace!”

A disgrace, that was the only word to describe what had taken place that night as far as Gabriela was concerned. A disgrace for everyone involved. For those repair gang members who had put on such a vulgar display, and for Sorensen who had reveled in the whole thing in some sick, sadistic way, and for the guards at the nearby gate, those supposedly pro-Gary guards who had done nothing to help besides alerting O’Hara. And then more than anyone else, it had been a huge disgrace for Gary himself. For that so-called leader who had allowed himself to become so drunk and so helpless that he had been made into a laughingstock that night, a clown, a... Oh, how would he ever be able to show his face around the terminal again? How!?

As the next morning dawned, Gary was in no shape to find out. No shape physically to go back to the terminal even had he been up to the moral challenge, suffering as he did from a full-fledged hangover for the first time in Gabriela’s experience. A hangover that left him too sick to get out of bed and drink coffee or eat breakfast, too sick to do anything but jump up and run to the bathroom every twenty minutes or so during the night and morning, returning to flop back down onto the bed a short time later. And it wasn’t until the afternoon was well underway that he ever managed to get up and make it all the way to the main cabin, bleary and unkempt as he began to rummage around in an apparent search for old coffee to reheat.

“Would ya like somethin’ to eat?” Renee asked as she saw him poking around.

“Nah, just coffee,” he groaned back before going over to take a seat at the table, propping his head up with both hands and then sitting that way for the longest time. Only letting go the support of his head when it came time for the occasional sip from the cup of coffee which Renee set before him.

And during the whole time he sat there in the main cabin, he never acknowledged Gabriela’s presence. Nothing beyond the barely perceptible nod of the head which he had given as he first entered. His only response to Renee’s query about more coffee a soft, “Please,” which he said without looking up. And he never budged as other crewmembers came and went over the next couple of hours, Captain Rob and Chris and the new Mike. He sat as though unaware of their presence, ignoring everyone and everything until finally a man arrived upon the scene who refused to be ignored.

Her Uncle José who sat down at the table across from the big man and began to talk. Asking questions that went unanswered. “Not going to work today, huh?” “Not feeling so good?” Offering advice that went unheeded. “You know you oughta eat some toast or something.” And steadily chipping away. Chipping away as his big friend’s resistance slowly began to weaken, to crumble bit by bit.

A grunt here and another there, the lifting of a finger from his forehead in some sort of signal, and finally the raising of his head. The dropping of his hands onto the table followed by eye contact.

“You had a hard time last night, huh?”

“Yeah, I sure did,” Gary croaked more than spoke.

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not really...”

Though speak the big man did in the end thanks to José’s persistence. “I fucked up last night,” he whined at one point. “I really fucked up bad.” Offering no details as he spoke, not then and not later. None of those details which had perhaps become so lost in the drunken haze of the night before that he retained only the biggest of the big picture. The utter humiliation he had suffered that night, the way he had made such a spectacle of himself right in front of everybody, as he confessed again and again to the man who sat across from him.

To that old man who nodded at the things he heard, demanding nothing more in the way of explanation. “Yes you did. You had a bad day,” Uncle José told him more than once. “And you have to learn to do better,” he would sometimes add in a tone that was half father-confessor and half teacher. Displaying as he did so a level of calm understanding which Gabriela never would have thought possible. With none of the verbal fireworks and none of the sharp judgments that usually adorned his speech. Because instead her uncle spoke on that day like a kind and forgiving father. Like a priest almost, listening silently to the sins of others before forgiving them in the end, asking only for the performance of some small act of penance.

For a series of Our Fathers or Hail Marys as a priest would have done. Or in this case what the old man asked of Gary was to come along with him into his room, saying that he had something in there that was sure to help. Something inside that sanctuary of his which, until that moment, no other person had entered since his arrival aboard the *Lady G*, as far as Gabriela knew. No one but that sour old man. And so as she watched the two men disappear into the room a few moments later, as she heard the lock click shut, she could only ask herself what was going on. What did her uncle want? And what did he have in that room? What did he do in there during all the hours he spent alone besides drinking?

She knew that he had a television set despite the fact that she had never actually seen it, having heard the sounds of movies or TV shows coming through the bulkheads on so many occasions. Sirens and screams and gunshots. And so as the big man entered the other man’s room that night, she could only hope that he was going there to watch a movie and not to drink. Not to share a bottle of whatever it was that her uncle was always sneaking aboard and drinking. Not to...

Or you know what? Gabriela thought as she considered the possibility. Who really cares anymore? Not her. Because as she thought back to the events of the last twenty-four hours, she felt much too tired to go on fighting any longer, too tired even to care what happened to that man of hers. That disaster of a man! Careening from drunken spectacle to deep depression to who knew what would be coming next. So that if her uncle was ready to try doing something about it? More power to him. Whatever he did, it could hardly make things worse.

And so it was with only the mildest of curiosity that she asked herself which it was going to be, television or alcohol. Or both, as it turned out. Because during the hours that the two men spent locked up inside the room that afternoon and evening, she would periodically hear gunshots or cavalry bugles or Indian war whoops, all the sounds of an old-time western movie. And then when Gary emerged at the end of the long session, she could smell the fresh alcohol on his breath, see the mildly inebriated look in his eyes and even hear a slight slurring of his speech. Though as he walked, there was nothing unsteady about his gait.

There was something odd about the way he walked, though. Gabriela noticed it even in the short distance that the man covered between the door to the old man's room and the table at which she sat looking over a few papers, plans for the deck maintenance to be performed once the rain finally stopped. Because she saw something unfamiliar in the big man's posture, something about the way he jutted out his chest so conspicuously, his fast-growing belly sticking out as well. And she also saw the strangest sort of swagger in the few steps he took, a swagger that... Oh, who could say what it was all about? And in fact, who could even say if it was actually there? If it wasn't just a figment of her imagination.

Despite the fact that he showed no signs of a hangover the next morning, Gary soon made it clear that he had no intention of setting out on the long walk to the terminal that day. Not with his wounds as fresh as they still were, and not when he must have known that the people working there had no desire to see him. Their now discredited boss who had made such a fool of himself lately, first with Landowski and then with those repair gang thugs. And so perhaps it was for the good of all that he stayed away for another day, stayed aboard the *Lady G*.

Resting and recovering and trying to put things behind him, Gabriela assumed, though it was hard to say what exactly was going on since he spent most of the day locked up inside that room with Uncle José. From mid-morning until well into the evening, after all the others had gone to bed, so that only she was present to see the man when he finally emerged.

Different now in some unmistakable way, Gabriela soon became convinced as she set down her book and watched Gary make his approach. With those subtle changes she thought she had noticed the night before having become more pronounced, those changes in the way he walked and talked and even in the way he made love to her that night. Because while his interest in sex may have been making a comeback after his brief bout of celibacy, the man who was with her that night seemed different in some indefinable way. No longer the sensitive and attentive lover who had driven her to such heights of ecstasy a few days earlier, and no longer the fast-learning beginner of their first days together, and none of the other variations which had come between. Because instead, all those men seemed to have been replaced by... By what? By some brand new version it appeared, one who fell somewhere outside the stream of everything that had come before. One who was different in some basic, elemental way.

And it was the same with that walk of his when she watched him set out for the terminal on Friday morning. His new-found swagger so unmistakable by then that she had to stop and gawk, had to ask herself what was going on. Was that really her man? Walking along in a way that was so... So much like when she first met him yet so different at the same time. With some of the easy self-confidence of his earlier stride having been revived now after a long period of

decline, though revived with something fundamentally different about it. Something that made it seem artificial in a way, forced.

As though it were the walk of a whole new man! The thought struck Gabriela the first moment she saw him that evening, returning from the terminal with a carriage and an attitude which were so different from before that she hardly recognized him at all. Because rather than the quiet and thoughtful man with whom she had been living over the last few months, the man who stepped aboard the *Lady G* that evening was gruff and overbearing. Stomping around with a big box in his arms, followed shortly by a second box after a return trip to the parking lot, and then finally a loud banging on the door to Uncle José's room as he shouted, "It's here."

What was there? What was this all about? Gabriela was too stunned at that moment, too confused to ask the questions out loud.

And so it was left to her uncle to respond to the big man's words as he emerged from his little cell. "Good. Let's set it up."

Set what up? It didn't take long for Gabriela to find out what the two of them were up to as they opened the boxes and pulled out a big television set and a video recorder and wires and who knew what all else. Looking around afterward for a place to set it up. A place right there in the main cabin!

"What's this?" Gabriela found her voice at last, that of the offended property owner. "What are you doing?"

"It's a present," Gary replied in a pleasant tone as though unaware of her reaction. "It's from me to you."

"But I don't want it..." she began.

Only to be cut off. "Yes ya do. A course ya do."

"No I don't! I tell you I don't want it in here."

"No...?" The strong words seemed to have dented the big man's consciousness in some small way, even if they had failed to penetrate it fully or to have any real effect. "Well, it's for everyone really. So ya don't have to watch it if ya don't want to."

"But I don't want it in here at all. I don't want it."

"Yes ya do. Or at least we do. The rest of us do."

"But I don't. I..."

"Ah, don't worry about it," he cut her off once again. "You'll learn to like it."

And with that, Gary seemed to go deaf to any further entreaties. Leaving Gabriela with no choice but to jump up and throw her body into the way or else to... to... To do nothing. To

watch and complain impotently as those two men went about their work of bringing that electronic monstrosity into her life. Big and loud and expensive and...

Hey wait a minute. Where did he get the money to pay for it? And how did he get it down here? "Where did you get a car?" She spoke with renewed vigor, her slow but steady resignation to the inevitable interrupted all at once by the new thought, the new inspiration. She spoke in a tone which she hoped would be heard.

"Oh that? I just took it. Cause they got plenty-a pickups around that dock, ya know."

"You took it? From whom?"

"Who? I don't know. Somebody. One-a Bowman's guys, I guess. I'm not really sure."

"You're not sure...?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't matter, ya know. Cause like I say, they got plenty of em down there, so they won't miss it." Gary paused for a second before adding in a more forceful tone, "Besides, I'm the boss around that place. Remember? So I can do whatever I want to. I can take any pickup I want to."

Gabriela found herself at a loss for words once again, unable to believe what she had just heard. The sound of such presumption, such casual indifference on the part of a man who had always been so considerate of others. Telling her now that he could care less what anyone else thought or felt. Telling her that the only thing he cared about anymore was himself and his own opinions. His and those of his little friend José, apparently. José Antonio as the big man had taken to calling him over the last couple of days.

"What do we watch?" the old man asked as they finished their setup work at last. "John Wayne? On the big screen?"

"Yeah, John Wayne. That sounds good."

"It sounds horrible!" Gabriela chimed in only to be ignored.

And then as the two men proceeded to torture her with that movie over the next couple of hours, nearly driving her from the main cabin despite her determination to stay no matter what, they would periodically break into conversation. Or more correctly, Uncle José would speak up from time to time to point out some lesson. "You see that? He's gonna kill that man in the end." "Yeah...?" "Showdown and shootout, because that's how you do it. That's how you solve your problems. Showdown and shootout." "Yeah right," Gary would go along, sounding skeptical at first though becoming ever more convinced as the bottle of cheap scotch which José had brought from his room along with the video tape steadily dwindled. "And that's what you've gotta do with that Sorensen guy, you know. Showdown and shootout." "Sorensen? Geez I don't know..." "Yes Sorensen! Because he's the bad guy, you know. He's the one who causes all your problems down there. Every single one of them!" "Sorensen?" "Yes. So what you have to do is the same thing that John Wayne would do. Showdown and shootout! Showdown and shootout."

As the movie came to an end, the bottle of scotch long since empty, José seemed to be in no hurry to get up and return to his room, sitting and watching in silence as the credits rolled. And it was only after the screen had turned to grain that ever he spoke again, launching all at once into a whole new subject.

“You know, you need a better name,” he began in a serious tone. “Because Gary? That’s like a hippie name or something.”

“It’s my warrior name,” the big man said mildly.

“Your warrior name!? Gary!!?” The old man laughed dismissively at the very idea.

“Yeah, my warrior name. Cause it was given to me a long time ago by a guy I really respected, so...”

“But it’s such a sissy name. And it’s not right for you. Not at all. Because what you need is a man’s name. A real man’s name.”

“I don’t know, cause like I been Gary for a whole lotta years...”

“What you need is a name like John Wayne or something. A name like... Johnwayne.” The old man pronounced it as a single word.

“That one’s already taken.” Gary’s voice was passive even as his words contradicted the other.

“Or like Clint or Rambo or... I don’t know. Something like Rush... or Newt...” Uncle José’s voice faded into thought. But then as the man with him said nothing, he soon spoke again. “No, Johnwayne. It’s gotta be Johnwayne, because that’s who you are. So it’s gotta be... Did they ever have any other names that they called him by? Big John or...?”

“The Duke,” Gary’s reply was soft and neutral. “They used to call him the Duke.”

“Duke!! Yes, that’s it. That’s the name for you. Duke!”

“Duke...?”

“Yes, Duke. And that’s what I’m gonna call you from here on out. So there’s no more Gary. Okay? You got that? There’s only Duke, there’s only... Right, Duke?”

“Geez, I don’t know...”

Before the old man retired to his room some minutes later, the big man was starting to respond to the name that he had just been given. Reluctantly it appeared, though responding all the same.

And he seemed so different in so many little ways in the wake of the movie and discussion, the bottle of scotch, that Gabriela wasn’t sure who was with her now as her uncle walked out and left the two of them alone. Was it Gary or Duke who sat there in the main cabin

with a strange, illuminated look in his eyes? The look of one half drunk and half lost in another world. And was it Gary or Duke who followed her into the owner's cabin a few minutes later? Pawed at her in some clumsily assertive way as she began to undress. Put his arm around her and tried to draw her toward him.

"No!" she said sharply as she pushed herself free. "Not tonight." And not with you, she added in silence. Not with a man I no longer know, she went on as she cut him off for the first time since she had met him. Cut off Gary or Duke or whoever she was with at that moment.

GARY? DUKE?

That man who was to take another big turn for the worse on the following day, as things turned out, a Saturday on which he spent the entire day aboard the *Lady G*. Though it wasn't that he acted strangely from the beginning. No, far from it as he spoke softly to Gabriela that morning, kissed her gently while the two of them still lay in bed together, and behaved in the most Gary manner that she had seen since his first visit to her uncle's room.

And his kind and friendly self was still on display when he entered the main cabin a short time later, greeted Rob and Renee with good natured jokes and compliments on her cooking while the old couple smiled in return. And while Renee piled the food onto his plate, one serving after another in an effort to satisfy the demands of his fast-growing belly. Her favorite boarder, she made clear from the solicitous tone in which she asked him after each plateful, "How was it? Would you like some more?"

And it was only as the morning began to advance, with Gary sitting in the main cabin reading one of his books, that a noticeable change began to come over him. Periodically glancing over in the direction of Uncle José's door before returning his eyes to the book, though with a slightly more serious expression on his face each time he did so, it appeared to Gabriela. An expression which seemed to become ever more that of Duke and ever less that of the man she loved. Self-absorbed and blind to the thoughts and feelings of those around him, his replies when addressed becoming more brusque all the time, more of a brush-off.

The man's attention ever more focused upon the imminent arrival of that grumpy old man, Gabriela thought, only to have her suspicions confirmed when she saw his face light up at the first sighting of Uncle José late that morning. A big smile as the old grouch emerged from his room in search of food and coffee, and a, "Good mornin' José Antonio." Spoken in a voice which may not have been as friendly or as cheerful as his earlier hellos, though it was several decibels louder.

And the two men sat together for many minutes after that, speaking in soft tones which only they could hear, whispering almost, until all at once Gary—or rather Duke—stood up as though to make an announcement to all present. To all the older crewmembers, the younger ones having taken advantage of their day off. He stood and looked around for a moment, looked at Rob and Renee, at Gabriela, and then in that same obstinate and unheeding voice of the evening before, he began to speak. "Ya know, we been havin' kind of a problem around here. A leadership problem," he added as his eyes turned toward Captain Rob. "And what we been

needin' is a captain who can really do the job. A captain like José Antonio here. And so that's why startin' today, he's gonna be the new captain."

"What!?" Gabriela was so dumbfounded by the sudden *pronunciamiento* that she was unable to say more.

"Cause you're a nice guy and all that, Rob, but I'm afraid that you're just not up to the job. Not like what José Antonio here is anyway."

"What?" Gabriela looked at Rob for some show of resistance, some effort to which she could add her support. Though as she looked, all she saw was cringing surrender, his eyes fallen to the deck, his head hanging submissively.

"So that's it, okay. That's the new law around here. Ya got it?" the big man said firmly as he glanced around the small crowd.

And it was only when his eyes met Gabriela's that she ever made some feeble attempt to confront him. "Wait. You can't do that," she said weakly, the feeling of helplessness of the night before flowing back into her as she spoke. "This is my boat..."

"Yeah, it sure is." The guy seemed to look right through her as he spoke, right past her. "And that's why I'm doin' this. I'm doin' it for you."

"For me...?"

"Yeah, cause you're way too nice to do it yourself, so it's up to me to do it for ya."

"What?" Gabriela was back to that monosyllabic reply as she gaped at the big man, with no idea what to say when she knew that he wouldn't have listened to her anyway. The installation of a new captain on that day as much a foregone conclusion as had been the earlier installation of the television set, it appeared. Unless of course she was ready to get up and fight them. Ready to fight for... For what? For whom? For that cowardly old man who looked so weak right then? As though in the last few minutes he had aged by ten years. Or for his wife who stood in slack-jawed silence, unable to speak or react in any way beyond a blank stare.

"Thank you," said Uncle José as he got to his feet and took a step forward. "I just want to let you know that from now on, we're gonna run things right around here. There won't be any more lazy people who don't do their jobs," he said with no hint of irony in his voice, he the one person aboard who had never done a lick of work. "And there won't be any more wasting money on things we don't need," he went on just as shamelessly. He the man behind the purchase of that big television set the day before.

And the hypocrisy was so glaring, so blatant that Gabriela found herself at a complete loss. Unable to come up with a single argument that might get through to those two men who were in the process of taking over her boat. Her boat! Replacing her kindly but incompetent old captain with a new one who was unkindly though just as incompetent, most likely. And doing so in an outright coup, without the least consultation or even consideration for what she might have thought or felt. She the owner and the only person with any real right to make those decisions,

though finding now that they were being forced upon her by that power hungry old man and that big man she no longer recognized. That man she had once thought she knew, once thought she loved.

With the takeover of her schooner soon complete, Gabriela faced the slow torment of having to spend the rest of the day watching those two usurpers as they strutted about like some sort of newly-crowned royalty. Or more correctly it was her uncle who strutted about in that way, standing taller than ever before while puffing out a chest which, until that moment, she had never realized that he had. His face glowing with pride and self-importance as he began to bark out orders to his subjects, and his physical stature seeming to grow ever larger in some weird way. The old man getting bigger and stronger and more imposing with each passing moment even as the big man with him seemed to become ever more reduced. Ever less a man in his own right and ever more a tool in the hands of another.

A tool who, unlike the rest of those present that day, appeared ready to do whatever it was that his leader commanded. Because while Duke would respond dutifully to José's orders, Rob seemed to have embarked upon a campaign of passive resistance, turning his back and walking away without a word whenever the other old man spoke to him. And he was seconded in that strategy by Renee who did much the same thing. Held her tongue not only around that so-called new captain but also around his big stooge, the one she had been so fond of only hours before. As for Gabriela, she made it clear from the beginning that she refused to go along, meeting Uncle José's first tentative attempts at issuing orders with such steely-cold stares that he soon backed down, soon gave up altogether.

And so as that self-appointed captain began his first day in power with an inspection tour of his new realm, a thorough inspection in which he declared his intention to examine every locker and storage space aboard, it was only Duke who went along with him. Only Duke who shook his head in disapproval each time that José screamed out, "No good! That's no good. We have to fix that." The old man roaring his condemnation of every aspect of Captain Rob's reign and declaring the whole place a disaster which would have to be completely redone. Every last remnant of that other man's legacy wiped off the face of the earth.

By mid-afternoon the two men seemed to have grown tired of their little game, returning to the main cabin where they set out upon a movies-and-scotch marathon which was to go on so long as to confirm Gabriela's worst fears about the presence of that big television set. With one shoot-em-up being followed by a second and a third and who knew how many more. All of them so harsh and so grating, so filled with shouting and gunshots and loud music that she barely held out until suppertime before being driven from the room. Wolfing down her meal and then retreating to the owner's cabin despite her earlier pledge never to give in, never to allow such a thing to happen.

Though what else could she do? Gabriela asked as she slammed the door shut behind her. Closed herself up inside the owner's cabin where she tried to read or to think of something else, anything else besides the noise that came blasting through the door, the bulkheads. Blasting for hours and hours and decades until finally there came a break. The sound of the men's voices as they said their goodnights at last, and as she turned toward the door to watch for the appearance

of that big man, that... The appearance of Duke, she told herself with dread as she prepared to reject whatever awkward advances he might try to make.

And in fact the man who joined her in bed that night turned out to be so pure-Duke, so totally Duke that even by morning she could see not a glimmer of Gary anywhere. Not a sign of kindness or consideration as the two of them got up and made their own coffee and breakfast on that Sunday, Renee's day off. And there was nothing even to discuss as they sat around in the main cabin afterwards, the big man so deaf to her wishes, so blind to her desires that all he could see or hear that day was himself. The echo-chamber of his own thoughts.

His own or those which had somehow been planted in his brain by that uncle of hers over the last few days, Gabriela soon became convinced as she watched the expectant glances which the big man would periodically cast in the direction of the old man's door. The big grin and the warm, "Hello," when Uncle José came out to join them. And then as that disagreeable old man announced his plans for the day ahead, Duke did nothing but nod his head and voice his assent after every sentence or two. Going along wholeheartedly while José told of his intention to continue his grand inspection tour of the day before. To continue and even to intensify that inspection, he added after having been informed by his big acolyte that everyone else had already gone ashore for the day. All their rooms empty so that it would be the perfect time for him to conduct a contraband search.

Contraband? Gabriela hardly knew what he could be talking about at first. And it wasn't until her uncle went over and began to rattle the door to Rob and Renee's room that ever the full dimensions of his plan struck her. His plan to invade all those people's privacy and rummage through their things!

"Where's the key? Where do you keep the spare key?" the old man shouted to her in that Anglicized Spanish of his.

"Spare key? I don't have one," she lied openly, glad at the chance to throw some small obstacle into the path of his devious plan.

So that if only the door to the forward crew's quarters had been locked as well. If only Uncle José hadn't been able to get inside and do his worst, turn everything upside down in a search for drugs and pornography and who knew what all else. Even alcohol, he mentioned at one point with such brazenness that he seemed to surpass even his own previous record for hypocrisy, his own previous low.

By the time Monday morning arrived at last, Gabriela had so many things on her mind, so many weird and surprising events to talk over with her sisters, that she could hardly wait to get down to the terminal for one of her now rare visits. Her chance to pick up the phone in that little office of hers and begin a whole day of consultation.

"Dump him," she was told by Estela, always the hardest and least sentimental of the sisters, "Get rid of him." "It'll be okay," said Beatriz, always the softest, "You'll work things out." While Marta's opinion fell somewhere between, and while Cristina was unavailable as usual.

Dump him? There was no way Gabriela could take that advice of Estela's literally, no way she could actually go through with something like that when she loved the man still. Gary or Duke, whatever he should be called. She loved that big guy in spite of everything. In spite of the bad episodes she had suffered through in the past and in spite of the changes which had taken place over recent days. In spite of that strange new attitude of his, and of the weight which he was putting on at such a prodigious rate, and of the way he seemed to be aging right before her eyes. In spite of all that, still he was her man. He was her lover and the man with whom she would someday sail off into the sunset...

So her only choice was patience, as Beatriz advised. It was to wait and be tolerant as she searched for ways to cope with that man and his growing eccentricities. Because the alternative? There was no way that she was ready to start all over with another man, even if she could find one who would be worth the effort. And she certainly wasn't ready to go through life alone, to return to those lonely days and years which had followed the death of Roy. So she had to make do with what she had, she told herself in conclusion. She had to put up with that man and his erratic behavior while hoping for the best. Hoping that this phase he was going through would prove to be temporary and that someday he would snap back out of it. Become himself once again, whatever that true self may be.

During breaks between calls, Gabriela would set the phone down and stare out the window as she tried to think things through, not leaving her walled-off little world for anything if she could help it. Not to visit those old friends she hadn't seen in weeks, not even Cervone, and certainly not to go eat lunch with that Duke character. Though despite doing her best to spend the entire day alone with her telephone, still she found herself being accosted during her rare bathroom or coffee breaks, approached by one or another of the women who worked in the main office.

"What's happened to Gary?" they would ask her each time, unaware of the fact that it was Duke to whom they were referring.

"I don't know," she would respond. "I don't know." And then she would say little more as those women launched into short litanies of the strange behavioral changes they had noticed in the man. Changes that were so outlandish, so embarrassing in some cases, that Gabriela couldn't have begun to explain them even had she tried.

Like for instance there was the cowboy hat which he had taken to wearing that day, pulling it out from behind the seat of the pickup truck and placing it on his head as the two of them arrived at the terminal. A hat which he must have purchased over the last few days and which, when combined with that new swagger of his, made him look even more ridiculous than he already did. Like a man lost in a world of fantasy somewhere, imagining himself to be a character in a Hollywood western perhaps. Or then again, maybe what that hat made him look like was a cheap imitation of a Texas oilman. All hat and no substance.

On a more serious note, those women who approached her seemed genuinely alarmed by the belligerent new attitude which the big man had begun to show toward Sorensen and his men, first on Friday and even more so on that day. The way he kept accusing the other big man of being the hidden force behind every problem they had around the terminal. Not only the

Landowski affair and the repair gang attack of the week before, but he would blame the guy for everything else as well, whether there was any possible connection or not. Slow production by the longshoremen? That was Sorensen's fault. Paperwork lost or badly written by one department or another? Sorensen again.

And when it came time for the big man to propose his solutions for those and every other problem they faced, he seemed to come up with the same answer every time: a challenge to Sorensen for the two of them to meet for a showdown. A challenge which he had already issued half a dozen times that morning for the guy to meet him—any time, any place—and have it out once and for all. Offering in that way what he must have seen as a final solution, though it was one which, according to the fears of those women, would in fact lead to little more than a return to the bad old days of open conflict around the terminal. A return to the polarization and hostility, the nighttime raids and vandalism which Gary's arrival had only recently brought to an end. And the only comfort any of them could take came from the fact that so far nothing had actually come from all the big man's shrill talk. That so far Gary—or rather Duke—hadn't made a move to carry out any of his threats, hadn't gone out in search of Sorensen or done anything else to make his words into more than hot air.

Gabriela would nod her head as those women spoke, saying as little as she could in return while watching for the first opportunity to make her escape. Back to her own private office where she still had so much to talk over with her sisters. And it wasn't until the afternoon was well advanced that ever someone dared to disturb her inside that place of refuge. A knock on the door before Bowman poked his head inside.

"Can I talk to you, Mrs. Munro?" he asked in an earnest tone. "It's important. It's very important."

"Eh?" she grunted as she briefly suspended her conversation with Marta.

"It's about the money that's been disappearing around here lately. Your money!"

"My money!?" With those words the man suddenly had Gabriela's full attention, prompting a quick goodbye to Marta and an urgent, "So tell me about it."

"Well, you remember that fund, don't you? The fund you had me set up for your yacht," the man sounded a bit tentative as he began. "It's uh... It's gone now. Completely gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone? How can it be gone?" The money which Gabriela had set aside to pay for the dry-docking and the great voyage to follow. Gone all at once? The whole idea sounded incredible to her, preposterous, so far beyond anything she would have conceived as being possible that she wasn't sure what she felt at that moment. Shock or disbelief or a desire to pinch herself and make sure that this wasn't just a bad dream. "What...? What happened?"

"Gary took it back on Friday. He said it was okay with you so I never..."

"He took it!!?" Gabriela cut in as Bowman's words began to fade into uncertainty. "He just took it? He came in here and took it?"

“Yeah, he said it was okay...”

“Okay? I never said that! I never told him.”

“Yeah, I can see now that I shoulda...” Bowman mumbled before falling silent and allowing Gabriela to vent her anger and sense of betrayal over the next minute or two. Waiting until she had finally calmed down a bit before going on in a solemn voice, “I guess I should let you know that that’s not even the worst of what’s been happening around here. Because today when he came in, he brought all these papers with him that I don’t even know where they came from. All these requests for loans and lines of credit where he’s putting up terminal assets for collateral. All our equipment and everything else we own.”

“What? I never told him... I never knew...” Now it was Gabriela’s turn to stammer.

“Well whatever he’s up to, you’d better do something about it, and you’d better do it fast. You’d better get this situation under control before he ruins us completely.”

Do something? Yes, absolutely! She had to do something, Gabriela told herself as the man finished what he had to say and then walked out, leaving her alone once again. She had to call Marta back up was what she had to do, had to talk this thing over with as many sisters as she could reach before the day was over. Talk and talk and prepare herself for the trip back home when she would confront that man and ask him what was going on.

Duke as the man turned out to be during their ride in the cab of the pickup truck. Pure Duke despite having taken off his cowboy hat and stashed it behind the seat as he got in, because it was only Duke who could brush aside her concerns as casually as that man did. With such a blithe, “Don’t worry about it. Everything’s under control.”

“But where is the money?” she insisted. “What did you do with it?”

“I invested it.”

“You what!?”

“I mean not me. I gave it to José Antonio to invest...”

“What!?” Gabriela may never have yelled louder in her life than she did at that moment. “José!? My Uncle José!?”

“Yeah, cause he’s got this plan,” Duke said calmly as though he hadn’t noticed the screams. “It’s this way where like in a couple-a weeks he can double the money or somethin’. That’s what he says.”

“A couple of weeks? But we need the money now! We need it...” to pay for the dry-docking, she was about to say when the words failed her. Because who was she kidding? she asked herself. That dry-docking which looked like it might never happen, having been put off so many times. April for sure, the shipyard manager had taken to telling her over the last week or two. April for sure. Soon to become May. June...

“Yeah, cause like José Antonio says that he can make so much profit on these investments he’s makin’ that pretty soon the boat and the terminal and everything else is gonna like pay for itself,” the big man went on at last as Gabriela’s silence stretched on.

“José? My Uncle José...?” was all she could whimper in reply. “You gave all the money to him?”

“Yeah, except for the part I spent back on Friday.”

“And you think he’s going to...? You think...? Don’t you know about my uncle and money?”

“Know about...? Oh, ya mean the part about the way he lost all that money the other time?”

Lost all that money? Gabriela wasn’t sure what the guy was talking about since the old man had never discussed any of those things with her. She only knew that he had been broke when he came to her for help. That after a lifetime of work and investment and whatever else he had done, he was broke. Flat broke.

“Well, that wasn’t his fault, ya know. Cause like those guys went and cheated him out of it. That’s what he says. Cause it was like... Ya know, those guys were a bunch-a crooks.”

Gabriela didn’t know how to argue back when she had so little information about her uncle’s past. Didn’t know what she could say that might get through to this man who sounded so utterly convinced. What besides blubbering a few more times, “José? My Uncle José...?” And then even when she asked Duke, begged him not to give the old man any more of her money, she got nothing more in the way of a promise than a quiet, “Not unless he needs it.” Not unless losing half of what she had wasn’t good enough for him. Not unless he wouldn’t be happy until he had lost it all.

Though what else could she do? Gabriela wondered. Fire the big jerk and then start all over down at...? No! She would never do that. Never. So instead she would have to leave him in charge of the terminal while she waited and hoped Beatriz-style. Waited for the man to return to his senses at last. Waited for Gary to somehow break back through.

And in the meantime what she should do was to go straight to the source, she soon concluded. Confront her uncle at the first opportunity and ask him what he was up to. Ask him where all her money had gone and when she would get it back. *If* she would get it back. Ask him if he would ever...

“Good evenin’, Ms. Gabriela.” She turned to see Justin making an approach as she stood alone in the main cabin waiting for her man to join her for supper. A grave expression on the face of that young man who she knew would never have waited around until that hour unless he had something serious on his mind. “Could I talk to ya for a minute?”

“Of course you can. Of course.”

“It’s about that uncle-a yours, about the way he’s been actin’ today and the stuff he’s been sayin’. Cause like according to him, he’s runnin’ this place around here now. He says that he’s the new captain.”

“Does he?” Gabriela wasn’t sure how to respond. Whether to acknowledge that supposed takeover of two days before or to deny it or to equivocate.

“Yeah. And when I asked Captain Rob about it he wouldn’t even answer, that goddamn panty-waist.” Justin’s emotions were running high, his curses hard and heated. “He just runs away every time he sees that asshole comin’, so we’re like... We’re on our own around here. This whole crew. Cause like we only got you that we can count on.”

“Me?” Gabriela was slightly stunned at the sudden weight of responsibility. “You can only count on me...?”

“Yeah, cause you own this ship, right? So whatever you say goes.”

“Yes but... I don’t know right now because there were some... some very strange things that happened in the last few days. There were...”

“But you can still straighten it out, can’t ya?” Justin practically begged her as hope seemed to fade from his voice, despair to rise. “You can stop him.”

“I don’t know right now, because it’s very bad...”

“Oh please. Ya gotta try. Ya gotta do somethin’...”

“Hey man, how’s it goin’?” Duke’s voice interrupted them all at once as he returned to the main cabin after having cleaned up for supper. “How ya been?” he went on in a phony-sounding imitation of the way in which Gary would have spoken to Justin some months back. And then as the younger man made no reply in this first real meeting of theirs since the days of the Landowski affair, soon the older man continued. “So what’re ya talkin’ about?”

“It’s my uncle,” Gabriela said when Justin failed to respond. “It’s about...”

“That asshole sayin’ he’s the new captain!” The youngster finished the sentence for her in an angry shout.

“José Antonio? Yeah, he sure is the new captain, cause good old Rob just wasn’t...”

“Well fuck you! And fuck your new captain!” Justin cut him off before he could say more. “Fuck all of ya,” as he turned and stomped up the passageway leading to his quarters. Not a glance at Gabriela as though to exclude her from his curse.

As Tuesday morning dawned Gabriela would have liked nothing better than to spend another day at the terminal talking with her sisters, so much still left to discuss. But then as Justin’s words of the day before came to mind, as she noticed the grim expressions on Rob’s and

Renee's faces that morning, she knew that she couldn't go. Knew that her place was right there, aboard the *Lady G* where hopefully she could do something to rein in her uncle's excesses.

Her uncle who looked and acted far less grumpy than he ever had before when he came out to join his new subordinates that morning. A hint of a smile even appearing on his face as he barked out orders to everyone he saw—everyone but Gabriela, that is. And while he would show signs of irritation each time that Rob ignored him, turned and walked away without a word, the only times she heard that burning anger which had previously seemed like such an intrinsic quality of the old man's voice came at those moments when he was met with open defiance. When Justin or one of the others would refuse an order or talk back to him. Because at those moments José would suddenly fly into a rage, yelling and screaming insults as he had so many times before, though with a new twist to his behavior on this day. One in which rather than running off to the safety of his room, he would stand his ground as he yelled instead. Strong and invincible as though under the aura of the big man's protection.

And he could be so intimidating when he spoke in that way that even Gabriela hesitated to take him on directly. Even she would have little more to offer than a change of subject or some other small ploy to break the tension on those occasions when the old man's wrath grew too intense. Asking herself what more she could do when she had no hero to back her up and no alternative candidate for the leadership post. Not Gary, now known as Duke and a supporter of the other side, and not Rob, that weak-willed old man who never could have stood up to her uncle when he was acting like this, and not... Who? Herself? Taking over and running things aboard that big schooner...? That was a possibility, though considering the opposition she was sure to face when she tried to assert her authority in that way, an opposition which could prove to be even more bitter, and certainly more personal, than what she had faced in her earlier attempt to take over and run the shipping terminal herself...

No! She wasn't ready for that. Not yet anyway. So she would just have to bide her time instead.

Do nothing for now while her uncle did his best to make life aboard the *Lady G* as miserable for everyone else as what his own life had previously been. Hounding the men wherever he found them, though not the women as Gabriela soon came to see. Not her of course, the owner of that vessel and the one through whose charity the old man was living there in the first place, and not Renee either, she began to realize as she noticed how lightly José would tread around her. Never once raising his voice, whether through some old-fashioned sexist idea about the treatment of women or whether from fear of what might happen to his food were he to anger her. And so despite the fact that he would have her as a captive audience whenever he found her in the galley preparing meals or cleaning up after them, the "orders" he gave never rose above the level of requests. Pleading mildly for favors while Renee would go on with her work as though he wasn't there, only the occasional, "Uh huh," revealing the fact that she had heard him at all.

More meat in the diet, he would moan and beg from time to time, more steaks. Because steaks were the only food that could truly aliment a person of pure Castilian blood such as himself, he insisted. So he had to have meat, more red meat.

Gabriela would wince each time she heard Uncle José getting started on that same old pure blood nonsense which she had heard so many times since his arrival. No more true now than it had ever been, though still he spoke of it with the same air of deep-seated conviction that he always had. Bragging since his first days aboard about the purity of his own blood while speaking disparagingly of the Basque heritage in her father's family whenever the subject came up. Calling the Basques a bastard race despite all the historical evidence to the contrary and declaring them to be the eternal inferiors of his own Castilian stock.

It hadn't taken long for that racist critique of his to spread from there until it had come to include every one of those mixed-heritage Americans who made up the crew of the *Lady G*, laughing at their claims to be Polish/Scottish/French or whatever combinations they came up with. Though it wasn't until Justin came onto the scene that the insults ever reached truly objectionable proportions. Justin whom José had christened with the name of Halfbreed on the first day they met, used that name behind the guy's back ever since. Up until now, that is. Now with his newly emboldened attitude when he was suddenly starting to use it openly as though it were the only name by which the young man was known. Yelling, "Hey Halfbreed," when he wanted Justin's attention.

And of all the people who came to live aboard the *Lady G* during her uncle's residence, the only one to escape his racial wrath was that big man formerly known as Gary. A man who carried pure Anglo-Saxon blood in his veins, José would declare each time that he got onto the subject. As pure Anglo-Saxon as he himself was pure Castilian, he would say, adding a strange note of irony to his delusional rantings. Because just as she knew that there was nothing pure Castilian about her mother's blood, Gabriela also knew that the big man could hardly be pure Anglo-Saxon. Not when he had an Irish last name.

There came a point in the early afternoon of that day when Gabriela noticed that her uncle was no longer there. His grating voice unheard over many minutes so that he must have slipped off somewhere.

Gone ashore, as she discovered later when she caught sight of him returning aboard with a bag from a liquor store in his hand. Descending the ladder into the main cabin where she sat alone, and where she suddenly realized that this was the moment she had been waiting for. Her chance to have it out with that old man, she said to herself as she set down the book on navigation which she had been studying and stood up, stepped into his path with a, "Hello," and a question about where he had just been. Soon to be followed by others.

"The investments, you know," José told her in a sharp, impatient tone. "I was working on the investments."

"Yes? The...?"

"The investments!" he cut her short. End-of-subject.

And then as Gabriela tried to assert herself over the next several minutes, reminding her uncle of the fact that it was her money they were talking about and trying to elicit some further information, the man's responses began to fall into a pattern which quickly became all too predictable. A pattern which she was to hear repeated again and again over the coming days.

“It’s very complicated,” he would tell her each time she demanded more details. “It’s many things, different things. Many types of investments.” Until finally as her efforts began to wane over time in face of such stubborn evasiveness, he left her with one last, “But everything is fine. Everything will be fine.” Spoken in the tone that one would use when talking to a child.

Oh, how frustrating it was for Gabriela to be faced with such condescension on the part of that old man, such blind ignorance when she tried to question the big man who was feeding him all her money. So exasperating that finally in her desperation, she arranged for a meeting with Bowman late in the week, a chance to discuss the matter with him and learn what she could. And to do so surreptitiously, more or less, since she said nothing to Uncle José before she left or after she returned, and since rather than getting a ride from Duke, she had Bowman send one of his people to pick her up. Drive her to the terminal where she soon received the bad news.

“He’s still at it,” Bowman told her in a serious tone. “He’s still taking out loans and mortgaging equipment.”

“He is? He didn’t stop...?”

“Stop? He didn’t even slow down. He just keeps going faster if anything.”

“Faster?”

“Yes. It’s almost like we’re in a spiral or something now, like where one debt keeps leading to another and another, or like... I don’t know what.”

“And there’s anything we can do about it?” Gabriela practically begged the man for some ray of hope, some way out.

But all she heard in reply was a soft, “I don’t know. Because whatever we do now... If you fire him or if you try to cut him off in some other way, it might just make things worse.”

“Worse...?” How could things get any worse?

“It might make it impossible for us ever to pay off what we already owe... But then again if we don’t stop him now, it’s... it’s... I’m afraid it won’t be long before we owe more than what this whole place is worth.”

What a mess! What a horrible mess those two men were making of her life and her plans, Gabriela kept repeating to herself as she made her return to the *Lady G*. What a disaster, what a... So what else could possibly go wrong? she asked.

Only to receive an answer later on that afternoon. The exact answer she had been fearing over the last few days. Justin and Chris suddenly appearing before her in the main cabin with drooping heads and sorrowful eyes, coming by to tell her that they were finished. That they couldn’t take it anymore, the new atmosphere which had descended upon the vessel that week. With Uncle José harassing them every time they turned around, yelling at them and calling them names, and with Captain Rob—Former-Captain Rob—too weak and timid to do anything about

it, and with that big jerk, that a-hole whose name Justin refused even to speak, somehow behind it all. Propping up José and breaking down the power of everyone else. Even of Gabriela herself.

“Please, I need you,” she pleaded with them. “Don’t go. Don’t leave me.”

Begging with her eyes even as Justin muttered, “Sorry,” in reply. “Cause we like ya and all that, we like ya a lot, but we just can’t...”

And so with a hug and a goodbye, another hug for Renee though not so much as a wave to either of the so-called captains, soon the two of them walked out of Gabriela’s life forever. Two of the best and most likable and most physically fit young men she’d ever had aboard—the halfbreed and the pervert, as her uncle was to brag later. They were gone and the crew was that much diminished by their loss. That much weaker and less capable of facing the challenges of the voyage that lay ahead.

Without Justin’s hard work and outgoing personality which had brightened so many of those grey and rainy winter days, and without Chris’s quick comebacks for Justin’s jokes, without the grace and taste which he had displayed on every job he performed. As instead all she had left for a crew were the two Mikes.

The old Mike who was a good enough young seaman, along with the new Mike who had to be one of the worst crewmembers they’d ever had aboard. Perhaps the worst of all. Soft and slow-moving and lazy, and as nearly worthless as a person can be. Because whatever job came up, he always seemed to have an excuse at the ready. Painting? His skin was much too sensitive for him to work with chemicals. Soogeying or scrubbing down? The same excuse. And then when it came to working aloft, forget about it. There was no way he could do that. Not with his fear of heights.

Incapable of taking a single step up the rigging, so that with Gary-or-Duke having grown as fat and heavy as he presently was, and with so many of the others in the crew being too old and infirm for work of that sort, the only people left were the old Mike and Gabriela herself. The only two people on that entire vessel who were up to the task of climbing the rigging and doing whatever it was that needed to be done aloft.

So what was going to become of her dream? Gabriela asked herself as she sat brooding in her cabin that evening, ignoring the sounds of explosions and sirens and gunshots that came through the door. How could she ever make the great voyage she had been dreaming of now that her crew was so reduced and demoralized? Intent upon nothing but feuding among themselves, it appeared. And then what about the money she would need to pay for the trip? Where had it gone and when would she ever get it back? Money, not just words. Not just the, “It’ll be okay,” that Duke kept repeating like a mantra, and not the dismissive, “The plan is working. Everything is fine,” that she always heard from her uncle.

Because everything wasn’t fine, and it wasn’t going to be fine unless she could get a handle on this thing, she told herself as she awoke the next morning, Friday. Not unless she could figure out some way to stop them or at least to uncover a few of the secrets that old man was keeping from her.

And so it was with an air of grim determination, desperation almost, that she seized upon what she soon came to see as the one viable plan of action which she still had left. Her last hope to learn something about the location of her money. It was a plan in which she would watch and wait for her uncle to go ashore as he did every day, follow him when he did so and see where he went besides the liquor store and the video rental. See where those investments which he always spoke of so vaguely might actually be.

And she did her best to be discreet when she set out in pursuit of the old man that day, trailing so far behind as to risk losing track of him at any moment. She tried, she really did, though still her efforts proved to be in vain. Her uncle showing that he had learned at least one thing during his years with the CIA as he quickly caught on to what she was doing. Waited to confront her just past a certain corner.

“Hello,” José said as she rounded the corner only to find herself face-to-face. “Are you going for a walk?”

“Hello, good afternoon, I...” Gabriela sputtered. Too shocked and too flustered at the sudden, unanticipated meeting to offer any coherent reply. And she was still mumbling and stumbling, still trying to come up with a good explanation when the old man walked off a moment later. Her plan a failure and her ignorance as to the whereabouts of her money as complete as it had ever been, with nothing to go on but pure speculation.

Asking herself, Where could it be? as she walked back in the direction of the marina. Where could that money have gone? It certainly wasn’t being spent on the *Lady G*, or at least not for any of the normal, everyday things that you would expect. Paint and wood and canvas and spare parts. All those purchases which Uncle José had long criticized and used as the basis for his accusations against the former captain, saying that the incompetent old fool was wasting their money on junk that they would never need. Because with the so-called change of command which had taken place over the last few days, the purchase of all those items had come to an abrupt halt. A stop so complete that according to what Rob had to say, not only had nothing new arrived during that week, but in fact a few of the tools and other more valuable items seemed to be disappearing. Sold ashore by his rival, he suspected, though he could offer no proof. He could only say that they had been there before and that now they were gone.

And the only piece of new equipment to have appeared on board the *Lady G* during that first week of José’s command was the big, fancy gyro-stabilized satellite-TV dish which he’d had installed out on deck, cables run to his own room and to the main cabin. That along with a brand new, custom-made mattress for his bed, a down comforter and top-of-the-line linen as befitted a captain’s cabin, he had told Gabriela on the day those items arrived. While being the unselfish man that he claimed to be, he had soon set out to share the wealth by passing along his old mattress and linen to other members of the crew.

That was it, though. There were no other visible expenses in those days during which Gabriela’s money had been trickling away so steadily. No logical explanation for where the rest of it could have gone besides the “investments” which her uncle claimed to be making. Those mysterious investments.

Oh, what a depressing weekend she faced, Gabriela thought as the end of the day drew near. With no way to exert control over her finances or any other aspect of her life, and with two full days of scotch-and-movies to suffer through. Two long, long days. The movie marathons bound to start early since those men would have little else to do during the day, bound to drag on late into the evening while she sat brooding alone in her room.

And though Gabriela made an effort to get away from that torture for a few hours on Saturday afternoon, walking up town in the rain and then wandering about in search of something to do, some excuse to delay her return, still the relief proved to be short-lived. Still she ended up being stuck in her room for hour after hour, late afternoon and all evening. With the usual action movie sound-effects blasting through the door while whatever sense of hope she might have recouped during her brief escape quickly faded.

Her hope that these things she was suffering through weren't going to last forever. Hope that someday her man would snap back out of whatever it was that he was going through. Hope that Gary would somehow reappear, toss aside that phony Duke persona which he had taken on and become himself once again. And she had reason to be hopeful, Gabriela told herself as she looked back over the last few days. Recalled those moments when vague traces of Gary had been visible, those mornings when she had heard distinct tones of kindness and consideration in his voice, and those evenings when there had been enough of her man present to where she had almost been tempted to make love to him. Almost ready to respond to those slight hints of Gary which she had seen on certain weekday evenings when his movie sessions had been relatively short, his scotch intake relatively limited.

Unlike on this day, this Saturday when he would be drinking so much and watching so many movies that by the time he entered her room that night, he would be Duke. As hundred percent Duke as she had ever seen him. Without the least remnant of that other man...

That man she had ruined! The thought struck Gabriela with such force that it nearly knocked her to her knees. Because it was her fault. It was all her fault for having thrust that man into a position he never wanted. A position for which he had been so ill-prepared and ill-equipped in so many ways. Putting him in charge of a modern marine terminal with all the challenges and complications that come with it and then abandoning him there. Leaving it to him and him alone to deal with the problems and pressures while she retired to her own little life and her own little interests aboard the *Lady G*. Leaving it to him to fend for himself, to sink or to swim completely on his own. So that if now the poor man was sinking...

She was sorry, she wailed softly to herself as she allowed her fast-growing sense of guilt to express itself. She was sorry for everything. She who was as much to blame for what that big man had become as was her uncle. Perhaps even more so. Because what had José actually done but take advantage of the conditions which she herself had created? Sown his seeds in the fertile ground which she had prepared. And so that sorry excuse for a man who was about to join her that night? He was all her fault. Duke, that poor imitation of the man she had first met and fallen in love with, that caricature of the other man almost, walking around in the same body but with so little else in common. So little of the spirit.

When Monday morning came at last, Gabriela had nothing to prevent her from spending the day at the terminal talking with her sisters, not when the crewmembers she had been hoping to protect from her uncle's abuse were already gone. Justin and Chris. So she had no reason not to go down there now and let those most intimate friends of hers know what had been happening over the last week. Nothing but the deep depression which had descended upon her over the weekend, that is. The sense of helplessness, hopelessness. The lethargy, the lassitude, the lack of will. With so much weighing upon her now, so much guilt, remorse, that it wasn't until midweek that she ever managed to muster up the moral fortitude to go there. Down to that former place of employment where she would have to face the opinions of her sisters. Long distance.

Even as she arrived at her office that morning, though, still she felt hesitant. With so much bad news to explain, not to mention that recent confession which she would have to share with the others whether she wanted to or not. Have to let it all out, as unpleasant as it was going to be, as much of an ordeal.

And so rather than heading straight for her office and her telephone, she looked instead for ways to delay the moment of truth. A brief visit to Bowman who told her that nothing had changed on the financial front, nothing for the better anyway. Only more of the same, more of the same. And then as she wandered over in the direction of the coffeemaker, Gabriela nodded at one of the women she knew, one of those who had approached her the week before.

"Did you hear about Sorensen?" the woman asked after the usual greetings. "They say he's back."

"Back?" Gabriela didn't know that he had ever been gone.

"Yes, whatever that disease was, I guess he's been cured. I guess he's okay... Though not because of the prayers!" she added sharply.

And then when Gabriela's only response to the news was a lost look and a quiet, "What do you mean?" soon the woman was setting out to give her the full story.

Telling how Sorensen had suddenly dropped out of sight about a week earlier. Afraid to face the threats being thrown his way by the big man, some people had claimed, though it wasn't long before rumors of another, more plausible explanation had begun to appear. Rumors about the guy being sick. And not just a little bit under the weather either, not with the signs as unmistakable as they soon became. With the guards at the main gate holding prayer vigils each day, going so far in the later days as to hand out cards with prayers written upon them as they asked for others to please join them. To pray for that leader of theirs who had evidently convinced himself and those around him that he would be able to cure himself of whatever he had through faith alone. With no help from those medical pagans who go by the title of doctor.

And while he had finally made his return to the terminal that morning, fit and healthy, all indications were that his sudden recovery had nothing to do with the "treatment" he had been giving himself over the past week. That in fact it had to do with the exact opposite, with a visit he was said to have paid to a doctor, and with a prescription for some pills which had quickly set him right after a week of needless suffering. That was the impression he gave to those who had seen him anyway. Not a word from his mouth about God, they all agreed, and with that big,

fancy cross which he had been wearing for so long conspicuously absent from the breast of his uniform that day. Other crosses soon disappearing from the uniforms of his followers as though his entire religion were in a state of collapse. As though the miraculous cure by those pills after the extended failure of his own faith-based remedy had thrown Sorensen into a full-fledged crisis of faith, perhaps even to an all-out abandonment of his religion and his ambitions to spread it throughout the world and to... do whatever else it was that he had previously hoped to do.

“So there’s peace now,” the woman said as she came to the end of her story. “There’s real peace.”

Yes, peace. There was peace at last, Gabriela muttered to herself as she walked away. Unsure how to take the news when the struggles around that terminal had become so distant to her, so meaningless that she felt almost nothing. No joy, no relief, just a... a... a mild curiosity perhaps. A quiet hope as well that she had finally heard the last of Sorensen.

But did it do anything to make her feel better or braver or more empowered as she entered her office and picked up the telephone? No, it did nothing of the sort. Nothing to make it easier as she asked herself which sister to call first. Cristina who she knew wouldn’t be there? The call merely serving as dialing practice. Or maybe Marta? The closest to her in age and always her closest friend. The one she could trust above all the rest with the confession she was about to make. The confession she had to make.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself so much,” Marta told her in a keep-up-your-courage tone. “He’s a grown man. He can make his own choices.” And then as she went on to talk about their uncle’s deviousness and his manipulations, about Gary’s lack of character, she sounded just like Gabriela had in her own internal discussions of some days earlier. Back when she had still been in denial, still intent upon blaming everyone but herself.

“You only did what you thought was right,” Marta said again and again, her words doing little to ease the discomfort which Gabriela felt in the pit of her stomach.

And Beatriz? The recipient of the second call since Gabriela hesitated at the prospect of calling Estela and listening to the disapproving lecture that was sure to come her way. She had only the usual advice to offer. “Everything will be fine in the end. This won’t last forever.” Comforting and upbeat and completely ineffectual. While when Gabriela happened to mention the news about Sorensen at one point, suddenly Beatriz’s optimism burst all bounds. “That’s good, that’s very good. Because without all that pressure down at his work, your man will be back in no time. You just wait. He’ll be back to being Gary again. Soon, very soon.”

Finally as the afternoon advanced, Gabriela found that she had no one left to call but Estela. Hardheaded, practical Estela who would surely... “Do you ever talk to him anymore?” she asked in a soothing tone that took Gabriela by surprise. “Talk about your life together or the things you did or... I don’t know, the books he reads.”

“Talk to him when he’s like this?”

“Yes, precisely when he’s like this. Because if you don’t talk to him now, what else does he have to remind him of who and what he really is?”

Wow, Gabriela had never thought of that. Fighting back against her uncle's influence in such a quiet and understated way. Using talk, nothing but talk. Addressing that big man as though he were still Gary and hopefully getting through to him in some subtle way. Reaching inside to touch whatever there was left of him, wherever the real man happened to be hiding.

After a while Estela got around to the subject of alcohol and alcoholism, offering her little sister advice which proved to be even more unexpected than what had come before, more counter-intuitive and more shocking in its own way. Because as she talked about ways in which to fight the effects of the scotch which their uncle was constantly feeding to that big, weak-willed man, her answer was to fight fire with fire, or at least with a little alcohol of her own. Not to expect Gary to give up drinking altogether as he had tried before, unsuccessfully, but rather to start using wine as a weapon of her own. To pour out a few glasses and drink it with him as the two of them dined, speaking all the while in intimate, seductive tones designed to create a clear connection in the man's mind. Wine and lovemaking if he would stick with her. If he would say no to Uncle José and his movies and instead spend the entire evening with her and her alone.

Wow, Gabriela said to herself once again as she listened. A plan, a real plan. The first new one she had heard in days, weeks, ages. And it was a plan that might even work if she were to play her cards right. Talk to the guy in that soft and oh-so-persuasive way every chance she got. Talk to...

To Duke as the man proved to be that afternoon. With no sign of Gary anywhere as he swaggered out to the pickup truck and stashed his cowboy hat behind the seat. Acting as puffed up and self-important as she had ever seen him, while every move he made, every gesture seemed to cry out, Look at me. Look at what I did to Sorensen. Look at how I kicked his ass. And he was so deeply absorbed in his glorious victory of that day that Gabriela's attempts at speech during the ride home came to nothing, as far as she could tell. Vacuous stares the man's only replies to her questions and comments, followed shortly by self-satisfied smiles as his thoughts seemed to go shooting right back to his recent triumph.

And so there was no point in attempting the wine trick that evening, Gabriela knew as the two of them sat down to their evening meal. Not when Duke was present in such undiluted form even before the beginning of the scotch-and-movie session. There was nothing to do but to wait for another, more propitious day. Wait until the next morning at the very least.

That morning when she resumed her low-key campaign from the moment the big man opened his eyes. Talking about their lives together and trying to call up whatever memories she could. Searching all the while for signs that she might be getting through in some small way. And she was back at it that evening and the next morning as well. Talking and watching while Duke's resistance seemed to fade ever so slowly, Gary's ability to recall past events to revive little by little.

And there was so much of Gary to be seen and heard by the time they sat down to supper on that third evening after the call to Estela, that Gabriela decided to go ahead and take the big step. To pull out a bottle of wine with their supper and then do her best to become the seductress that she had never been. Staring into his eyes as the two of them drank toasts together, brushing his knee with hers and smiling, grabbing his hand after awhile and bringing it to her lips, kissing

it slowly and softly. As all the while the look in the big man's eyes grew ever more human, more alive. Ever more the look of Gary, the man she loved. The timbre of his voice, the thoughtfulness behind the comments he made.

So much himself by the time Uncle José made his usual after-supper appearance, in fact, a bottle of the expensive scotch which he had recently taken to drinking in one hand and a video cassette in the other, that Gary hardly reacted at all. His only response a mild but decisive, "No thanks, José Antonio. Not tonight. I feel like readin' instead."

"Reading!?" The old man snorted as though he were repeating a dirty word, mentioning something that decent people didn't talk about. And he was still mumbling to himself in disbelief as he returned to his room some minutes later, all his gestures having gone unanswered. His raising of the bottle, the cassette. Waving them about to catch the big man's eye. All of it ignored by that previously faithful disciple of his.

And so as José went off at last, off to his room to brood, he left that main cabin to Gabriela and her man for the first time ages. Left them alone to talk in the same intimate way that they once had. Reading a bit at first, though the distraction of being in each other's company seemed to make it impossible for either of them to concentrate. Impossible to think about anything but the person they were with as they exchanged furtive glances, made little jokes or teased each other flirtatiously, until finally they cast all pretense aside. A soft caress from Gary as he moved in close, the caress of a lover, not the clumsy groping of some brute out to take what he wanted. The caress of that man Gabriela had known before, the one she loved and the one she responded to every time. Kissing him now as he touched her gently where she loved to be touched. Moaning softly as he ran his hands over her body. Breasts and waist and back and butt. And she was already panting with pleasure even before he stripped off her clothes and lay down beside her. Squirming and screaming in ecstasy as he slid inside.

He's back! Gabriela practically shouted the next morning as she looked over at the man beside her. My man is back.

Or at least what was left of him was back, she said in a more critical tone as the morning wore on, that Saturday morning during which she had hours to look him over and try to see what he had become. Fat now, there was no denying that fact as his belly had grown too big to hide even when he tried. And he looked older now as well, his hair almost as grey as it was brown. And then what about his walk? That swagger which seemed to have been toned down all at once and turned into... Into what? Not the free-and-easy stride of his first days in town, lost gradually over the ensuing months as hesitation and self-doubt had raised their ugly heads. No, the way he walked now had nothing to do with a revival of that earlier spirit, not a true revival in any case, containing more hint than substance of that previous walk. More hint than substance in the way he spoke as well, as his whole personality seemed to have gone pallid in some vague and indefinable yet undeniable way. The entire man to have faded to a mere shadow of what he had been before. And though there may have been moments when that shadow appeared so clearly and distinctly as to become nearly corporeal, still it remained a shadow all the same.

Better than any version of Duke, though, Gabriela told herself as she thought about it further. Shadow or solid, it didn't matter as long as there was something of Gary there,

something which her uncle hadn't managed to get his clutches... Her uncle who would have all day to try reasserting his evil influence! All that day and the next day as well. With so many chances to tempt that man and try to draw him away...

"Why don't we go out for the weekend?" she asked all at once. "We can go for a drive or something. Go spend the night somewhere and get away from here for a little while." Go off and spend money that they really couldn't afford. Hotel and restaurants and who knew what else. Though still when you considered the alternative...

And as it turned out, her strategy worked so well that by Monday morning everyone aboard the *Lady G* seemed to have taken notice. "He's back," Renee crowed after having stuffed the man with breakfast in the way that she so often had before. "He's acting like good old Gary again." And even Rob was seen to smile for the first time in weeks as a new air of happiness and contentment began to spread among the rest of the crew as well. To everyone but Uncle José.

Because at the same time that everyone else seemed to grow more lighthearted by the hour, José grew ever more resentful. So bitter, so openly bitter that soon that old-time sour self of his came to seem positively sunny. And as he yelled orders and insults at everyone he saw, yelled them just to prove that he was still the boss, evidently, he would go absolutely hysterical when those orders were ignored as they invariably were. By Rob and Renee as was to be expected, but also by the two Mikes who now began to get in on the act, turning their backs on him while he spoke since they knew that what he said meant nothing anymore. Not when he no longer had an enforcer behind him. And so the old man would be left with nothing to do but to fuss and fume, to grow so angry, so heated that there were times when Gabriela could have sworn that she saw smoke rising from his head.

And it was only in the big man's presence that Uncle José ever made an effort to control himself and show what he still had left for a good side. Not raising his voice around Gary just as he had never raised it around Duke, but instead he would speak softly and pleasantly. And he would smile a lot, too. Smile as he did when he answered the big man's knock at his door early in the evening of that first weekday following the reconversion.

"Hi there, José Antonio. I'm here for Ms. Gabriela's money," Gary told him in a businesslike tone that reflected none of the warmth in the other man's hello. "Cause ya know the two weeks're up, so that double your money stuff..."

"Oh, the money... The money..." José's mouth continued to smile even as the rest of his face froze in wide-eyed surprise, as his voice faded into uncertainty.

"Yeah, so ya can go ahead and... You know, ya can give it to me and I'll give it to her."

"Yes of course. The money..." The old man's eyes darted about the room as he spoke. "The money..." he muttered again, "The money..." an air of barely-suppressed panic creeping into his voice, as meanwhile the last of his smile melted away. And it wasn't until after some moments of hesitation, indecision, that he finally retreated into his room, came back out a short time later with a small wad of bills which he handed to Gary.

“Is that all? That’s nothin’ like... You know, double anything,” the big man said a bit dubiously as he looked at what he had just been given.

And as the old man quickly replied with a whole string of excuses. “That’s all I have right now, because... You know, it’s very complicated. I told you that before. So I can’t... I mean the investments are still working. We’re still making money, but it’s just... Some of it will take a little bit longer...” On and on José babbled while Gary’s patience appeared to run thin. A half step back and then another, and finally a nod of goodbye as he turned and walked away in mid-sentence, handed what little money he had been given to Gabriela.

Uncle José re-emerged from his room later on that evening. He came out after supper just as he had been doing every night over the last few weeks, as he would continue to do over the coming days though with far less success than what he had previously enjoyed. He stood waving his bottle and movie cassette while the big man barely seemed to notice. Waved them and made other gestures designed to catch the man’s eye, until finally after some minutes without a response, he gave up and returned to his room. Only to come back out and try again the next day and the day after that and the day after that.

Because while Gabriela’s uncle may have been short on a whole series of positive character traits: honesty and modesty and consideration for others, to mention only a few, there was no lack of persistence to be found in his personality. Stubbornness the less charitable might call it. An absolute refusal to admit defeat no matter how many times his tactics failed. And so he went on and on in that same way as though convinced that if he just kept trying, sooner or later the big man was bound to give in and return to the fold. Bound to come back over to his side and revive those glory days which he had so recently enjoyed. Because nothing was really lost as long as he refused to give up, he seemed to be saying to himself.

As long as he kept plugging away and plugging away. Night after night as the week dragged slowly by. As the equinox arrived at last and spring began, or at least as the calendar said that it was spring. The only sign to be seen outside the fact that those cold and windy and soggy days were not as short as they had been before, that by now they contained more daylight than they did darkness.

Night after night with that same patient strategy aimed at luring the now-hidden Duke back out into the open. Smiling and speaking in friendly tones when Gary knocked on his door as he did every evening, the big man making his nightly attempt to collect what he could of Gabriela’s money. Because Uncle José never uttered a harsh word while in the presence of his former protégé, and he never lost his temper no matter how coldly, how formally the other man may have treated him. He never allowed the other side of his personality—what most would call his true personality—to show through.

Or at least he held it in until that one night late in the week. That evening of a day during which José had found himself being insulted in terms much too blatant to be ignored or absorbed in the course of the few short hours between then and the big man’s visit. Insulted by the old Mike of all people, that quiet and inoffensive young man who spoke up on that day in a way that he never had before. Responded to one of the old man’s orders with a calm but firm, “Hey, don’t ya know that you’re not the captain around here anymore? Rob’s the captain now.”

“What!!?” José had frozen on the spot at the sound of those words, as though that first open announcement of what to everyone else was already old news had caught him by complete surprise. Incredulity in his startled eyes as he glanced over at Gabriela a moment later, anger and confusion in his voice as he reacted to her silent confirmation. “But you can’t do that! I’m the captain! I’m the captain!!”

The screams had soon given way to wails and moans as the old man retreated toward his room in the way that he had so many times before, though as he hadn’t done since the day he seized power. Not until then, that moment when suddenly his whole happy little world seemed to fall apart right before his eyes, collapsing all around him and leaving him with nothing anymore. His power gone, completely gone, and with no future to look forward to but a return to that sorry excuse for a life which he had been living before.

And there was a grasping desperation in his voice when he responded to Gary’s knock at his door a few hours later. “What’s this I hear about that... that... that stupid old man being the captain?” José blurted out, stumbling a bit in the middle as though it were impossible for him to say the word Rob.

“Oh ya mean Rob? Yeah, that’s right, he’s the...” Gary began mildly.

Only to be cut off by an angry, “But how can you do that? How can you put him ahead of me?”

“It’s not me really. Cause ya know this is Ms. Gabriela’s ship...”

“So you’re both against me now!? Both of you!?” The anger in Jose’s voice was fast rising to rage.

“No, we’re not for ya or against ya, but it’s just... Ya know, like she’s the owner...”

“And if she says so, then you turn against me? You betray me! You take the side of that stupid old man, that incompetent, that... that...”

“Hey man, take it easy.” It was Gary who cut off the other man now as the guy struggled for words.

“Take it easy!?” Jose screamed even louder as that phrase appeared to have incited rather than soothed him, whether because of the calm and unaffected tone in which it had been uttered or because of the fact that it sounded so unlike anything that Duke would have said. It set him off beyond anything Gabriela had seen before.

With the old man yelling in ever more hysterical tones despite the efforts by Gary to defuse the situation. The big man’s, “It’s nothin’ against you, ya know. It’s not like ya weren’t doin’ a good job,” coming to nothing as José refused to be consoled. As his fury seemed only to grow more intense with each reassurance he received, each attempt at a comforting word. And as his verbal attacks upon Once-Again-Captain Rob did nothing but escalate by the second. “He’s stupid! Don’t you know how stupid he is?” “He’s a wimp.” “He’s a senile old man.”

Uncle José threw out charges one after another while Gary looked on calmly. Taking none of the bait being tossed his way as instead he resumed his attempts at de-escalation during each pause in the onslaught. Speaking with a quiet unconcern that left the old man ever more visibly frustrated. Left him searching ever further afield for new lines of attack. New charges.

“Do you know what those people talk about at night?” he asked all at once. “Those people... I can hear them through the wall, you know.”

Hear them? When? Between movies? Gabriela asked herself.

“I hear them... I hear...” José’s voice faded a bit before booming back. “I hear them call you names, that’s what I hear. They call you stupid and ugly and... and... They call you Duck! Did you know that? They call you Duck when your back is turned.”

“Duck?” the big man chuckled slightly as he spoke.

“And Gabriela!” the old man hollered, cutting the laughter short. “Do you know what they call Gabriela behind her back? They call her... They call her... the spic! That’s what they call her,” he spit out the words venomously. “Because they’re racists, those two. Did you know that? They’re racists!”

José paused for a moment, gazing into the face of that big man who stood before him. Silent and so clearly unconvinced by what he had just heard that soon the old man was digging deeper still. “And you know that they’ve been stealing from you, don’t you? I can hear them talk about it at night. I hear them laying their plans to... to... I hear them talk about what they’re gonna steal next!”

“Steal?” There was a slight rise in Gary’s voice as he spoke, the first real response the old guy had heard.

And a response that seemed to propel him forward into even higher gears. “Yes, they steal things and they sell them in town. Did you know that? They steal your tools and your... your... Why they even steal our steaks! Because that’s why we never have any steaks to eat around here. It’s because they’re always stealing them and selling them.”

“Yeah...?” The big man’s tone was back to calm indifference.

Much to José’s apparent distress. “And you know about all the troubles we’ve been having with our investments, don’t you? All the... Well it’s all their fault!” the old man’s voice rose to new heights of passion as he struck out in yet another new direction. “It’s them. They’re the ones who are causing all the problems, that stupid old man and his stupid old wife. They’re the ones who... Because they’ve been sabotaging me all along. Did you know that? They’ve been sabotaging my work and making me lose money and... and... They’ve been keeping me from paying back what I borrowed. Because it’s all them. It’s their sabotage!”

The charges continued to pour from José’s mouth for some minutes after that, some of them attempts to take things to greater extremes while others were merely repeated or recycled. They flowed out in a steady stream as Gary began to fidget, having heard enough already,

Gabriela could see even from her limited perspective. A slight shuffle backward as though he were preparing to leave. When suddenly that sign of impending flight seemed to push José all the way to the edge. Over the edge.

“They’re perverts, you know!” the old man shouted with all the force he could muster, grasping at what he must have seen as his final straw. “They do sick things in that bed. I can hear them right through the walls. I can hear those... those filthy things!”

Oral sex, anal sex, clothes swapping. The list went on even as his former disciple turned and started to walk away, his head shaking slightly as he went. Group sex with people they pick up on the streets. Group sex with their own grandchildren! Sex with animals!!

In the days that followed, Uncle José did a better job of concealing his feelings when he was around Gary, never exploding again even on those weekend days when he caught sight of the man talking and being friendly with that... that so-called captain. But instead he went back to playing his quiet, patient game of trying to win the man back with movies and bottles of scotch. Going after Captain Rob every chance he got during their nightly money-collection sessions, tossing out every new line of attack that he managed to dream up, though doing so in a cool and controlled sort of way. His smiling words designed not to offend that big man whose loyalty he hoped to regain someday. And his eyes would peer intently whenever he was in Gary’s presence as though in search of some sign of weakness, some chink in the armor of the big man’s connubial contentment and some way to bring that other version of him back out. Duke, the longed-for Duke.

In the meantime all José could do was to wait and to hope. Wait just as Gabriela was doing in those days, though for very different reasons in her case. Because what she wanted more than anything else right then was spring, a real spring with blue skies and warm days, and a chance to set out on her great voyage at last. Once the dry-docking was out of the way, that is—April for sure the manager was telling her still, even as that month drew near, so that maybe it would turn out to be true this time. Maybe. And then maybe with some real luck, enough of her money would have trickled back in by that time to where she would actually be able to pay for the repairs. Pay for the trip as well since things like that don’t come cheaply. Dreams such as hers. Dreams of setting out to see the world. Tossing everything aside and sailing off...

OH, NO!

Oh, no! What happened!? Gabriela asked herself as the truth became too clear to be denied any longer. How could she have gotten pregnant? And especially now, at this worst of all possible moments, with the great adventure about to begin.

But no, there was no mistaking the evidence: the missed periods and the slight nausea and the strange new sensations in her breasts. She was with child, there could be no question about that. And the only thing she had to wonder was how she could have let it happen. She who had been around long enough to know better, spent years living with a man and never once... Never taken a single precaution, she realized all at once, not with a man who was incapable of conceiving. So that now with this other man, this fertile man...

How could she have been so stupid? To get pregnant at a time like this when she had so many other things to do, so many good reasons to put it off. And especially with a man who was so... A man who...

Was he really the man she wanted to be the father of her children? The one she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? This man who had disappointed her in so many ways ever since she met him. Full of promise and potential at the beginning, but then failing to measure up in the days that followed. Failing time and time again. Failing to become the man that she thought he could be. Knew he could be if only he weren't so... So weak in the very places where a man is supposed to be strong, and so often plagued by self-doubts. So soft and pliable when he should be firm, and so wishy-washy as the North Americans would say. So easily manipulated and led astray as her uncle had proven over recent weeks when he had taken hold of that man and moulded him into a shape that even he would have trouble recognizing. Because that man...

What was he going to be when he grew up? The question which had been nagging at Gabriela suddenly came bursting into her head. What was he going to become? This middle aged man who still couldn't seem to make up his mind about what he wanted to be and what he wanted to do with his life. Still going with the flow and doing her bidding or her uncle's or that of anyone else who came along. So that in the end the question became: What would he do when he finally got around to doing his own bidding? What would he become when he finally became himself?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: NU DON?

all 4 now. got 2 go. my story dun. my day dun 2. time 4 nu day 2 bgin.
hope u likd it. best i cud do. up 2 u and u and u 2 do betr.
g burton